

A Comparison of the Mission Methods Used in the Early New Testament Church with Those Used Today in the WELS Home Mission Program

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Introduction

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is not a textbook on missionary methods, but rather an inspired account of the *missio Dei* being accomplished by God through the apostles and early disciples. As such it shows us how the early church met the obligation and opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel for the salvation of the world in its particular time with its peculiar resources.

Therefore our comparison of the missionary methods of the early New Testament Church with those of today does not have the objective of disclosing the Petrine and Pauline methods as regulatory for our day. Nevertheless their methods, flowing as they do from our common objective based on unchanging principles, will prove instructive and suggestive of alternatives and possible changes as we view today's methods.

As one studies the book of Acts and the Epistles one is struck by the flexibility with which the early church and its leaders met mission opportunities. The force and vitality of their resurrection Gospel shaped methods to fit the needs of the recipients and their individual situations. Thus we find the church compelled to adapt itself to each situation. Form, organization and methods evolved from the opportunity. This did not lead to chaos and disorder, however, because the underlying objective of the mission of the church was clear and the unchanging truths of the Gospel and the changeless will of God continually kept the form and methods headed in a compatible direction.

Objectives

To make a worthwhile comparison of methods we must first address ourselves to the understanding the early church had of its mission, of its objective. The early church was aware that its work was really not its mission, but the *missio Dei*, work that belongs to God. They heard Jesus say that God so loved the world that he sent His Son that the world through Him might be saved. God, the Sender – God, the Sent. They knew that God, the Father, and God, the Son, sent the Holy Spirit to reach the souls of men through the Gospel. Again God, the Sender – God, the Sent. How clear that the sending mission of God is the salvation of the world. God will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2: 4). This is indeed God's mission.

The early church remembered Jesus' words making them not only objects of that mission, but, as a church, partners in the *missio Dei*: "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." (John 20:27). They called to mind the prayer spoken to that heavenly Father on their behalf "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As Thou hast sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world." (John 17:17-18). As put by Georg F. Vicedom in "The Mission of God" (p. 8), "The church's commission is prefigured in the divine; her work is there assigned. The meaning and content of her work is determined by the *missio Dei*." (p. 54) "Apart from this *missio Dei* in Jesus Christ there can be no further sendings today. Everything that happens since His *missio* has proceeded from Him, has been determined by Him, is encompassed by His sending, and is His continuation of His sending."

How simply Jesus put it in His Great Commission "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19-20) "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to

every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16: 15-16).

What was the objective of the early Church, of Peter, Barnabas, Paul? To preach the Gospel to all nations! Or is this a correct and complete statement of the objective of the early church? Does it state the objective of the *missio Dei*? Unless we clarify the New Testament objective for our church's mission we obviously will not be clear as to its methods.

Peter, as an objective for his Pentecost sermon, said "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost," (Acts 2:38). Paul declared in Antioch of Pisidia "For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth." (Acts 13:47) Paul declared before Agrippa that after his conversion he was sent by God to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins." (Acts 26:18)

The early church saw as its task the preaching of the Gospel, not as an end in itself, but to establish the kingdom, that is, to bring men to repentance, to faith, to become disciples of the Lord.

Paul was driven with an irresistible yearning for the salvation of men which led him to cry, "Yea woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel." (I Cor. 9:16) The eternal fate of the unregenerate Jews lay so heavy on his heart that he said "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren." (Rom. 9:3)

As Ferdinand Hahn writes in "Mission in the New Testament" (pp. 167-168), "For the New Testament the mission is determined by two facts: the one is the knowledge that the eschatological hour has dawned, bringing salvation within reach and leading to its final completion (Matt. 24:14) and the other is the commission that they had received from Jesus Christ and his authorizing them to preach the glad tidings that concerned everyone (Matt. 28:19-20)."

The Gospel was to be preached unto the ends of the world in view of the coming end of the world, the time of judgment and justification of the souls of men. Thus we rightly state that the objective of the church's mission was the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of men.

What about today in our Home Mission program? Our stated objective is "To share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all people" within our land. This objective seeks to encompass all the activity of our Home Mission Division. As broad as it is, it may leave us in some doubt as to its direct application.

How do we interpret this objective in practice? There appear to be two schools of thought in confessional Christian circles as to the objectives of mission work. I believe we at times are influenced by both to varying degrees. The one can be called the Theology of Search (or Seed-Sowing), the other the Theology of Harvest.

The Search Theology maintains that in Christian mission the essential factor is not the "finding" of souls, but going everywhere and preaching the Gospel – for which there is some excellent biblical authority.

The Harvest Theology on the other hand maintains that the *missio Dei* and thus the Christian mission has as its prime aim the "reaping" of souls – through the preaching of the Gospel.

In a practical way we face the question: Is God concerned that countable persons be won to Christ? – for if He is, we as a church should be too. To clarify ourselves as to our objective, let us look at typical statements of proponents of the two "theologies." The Search Theology exponent reminds us that we are to proclaim the gospel everywhere no matter whether men believe or not. We are responsible for sowing the seed, God gives the increase. In a sense, the church is neutral to the response to the gospel. It is not the purpose of the church to coerce men into the kingdom. In any case, one soul is of infinite value and thus who can say that more souls are of more value.

Proponents of the Harvest Theology of missions on the other hand declare the above to be limited truths. The Great Commission itself sets forth the objective of making disciples of all nations, not just preaching to them, of baptizing them into the family of the Triune God, of teaching them as obedient members of the kingdom. Jesus bids us pray for reapers for the harvest. (Matt. 9:37) His kingdom parables of the lost coin and

the lost sheep stress the effort to find; and His parable of the great feast emphasizes that the invitation was not the goal, but guests at the table was.

The dangers of overemphasizing Harvest Theology are apparent. On the other hand it has good biblical basis as long as it emphasizes that only One really does the work of converting and that is God. The objective of mission work must be and is to bring men to Christ through the Gospel and having brought them to Christ to prepare them for the mission of the Church. "Finding" the lost sheep must be followed by "folding" and "feeding."

Planning

With the objective of making disciples for Christ clearly presented to them by Jesus, the early Church sought ways to accomplish the task. The very nature of the new life within them enabled them and even compelled them to act without giving great thought to planning and strategy. They had the direction of Jesus to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth. (Acts 1:8) The strategy of where to do mission work was laid down for the early church. Nevertheless it is obvious that Paul did planning. On several occasions his planning was upset by God's revelation that he was not to go to a certain place. In his epistles he notes his plans to visit certain churches and even to go to new places such as Rome and Spain. Planning was done, even though it was at times changed by divine intervention.

Fields

It was this general plan of the Spirit that moved Peter to preach in Jerusalem on Pentecost to people of all lands. Philip in turn reached out to Samaria (Acts 8:5). The persecution of the Christians by Saul meanwhile scattered them beyond the confines of Judaea. (Acts 8:4) Peter's experience with Cornelius gave early indication that the gospel was not only for the Jews. (Acts 10:35)

The conversion of Saul and the commissioning of Saul and Barnabas by the Holy Spirit for work in Asia Minor widened the circle greatly. (Acts 13:2) It was apparent that the Holy Spirit was behind a mission strategy of concentric circles of mission expansion. The guidance of the Holy Spirit was a major factor not only in this general geographic strategy, but even in individual field decisions, both negative and positive, as in the case of Asia and Bithynia ("No!") and Macedonia ("Yes!"). (Acts 16:6,7,9)

The selection of fields for mission work within the widening circles seems to follow a specific pattern in the case of the Pauline journeys. Paul usually refers to provinces rather than cities when speaking of his plans or trips. Within the provinces, however, he chose a strategic point from which to work out. These were generally influential cities with the following characteristics:

- center of Roman administration which granted stability
- center of Greek civilization with common language and culture
- center of Jewish influence providing a starting point
- center of commerce and trade giving mobility and ease of communication.

Paul appears wise and correct in this strategy for as Stephen Neill notes in "A History of Christian Missions" (pp. 29-30), "The Roman Empire was a world of cities, each of which dominated the thought as well as the economic life of the surrounding country. The Christian Church began as a city Church; it was only slowly and gradually that it moved into the country, and in general the country folk were the last to yield to its influence."

It is also interesting to note that the first mission center outside of Jerusalem in Antioch had a strong nucleus of Christians gathered by lay Christians who scattered there under the persecution of Saul.

Paul sought out cities where the gospel had not as yet been preached, as he wrote to the Romans (15:20), "So have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation." Perhaps this concern reflected the Savior's injunction to go to the uttermost part of the earth.

Personnel

The type of missionaries chosen by the early church was not the result of haphazard selection. Again the calling of the Holy Spirit is the essential feature, for example with Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2), Philip (Acts 8:26), Peter (Acts 10:19). But the church also called men to go forth on its behalf to preach in a specific field, such as Peter and John to Samaria (Acts 8:14), Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:20), Barnabas and Saul to Cyprus (Acts 13:3).

These men fitted the requirements laid down by God through Paul in his pastoral epistles. The church also was aware of special gifts of men and used them accordingly, such as Appolos with his eloquent presentation of Christ to the Jews as the Messiah of the Scriptures. (Acts 18:28) On the other hand Paul questioned the fitness of John Mark for a specific mission. (Acts 15:38) On occasion missionaries worked alone, at other times as a team. The early church did not fault Paul for being a part-time missionary for a while. (Acts 18:3)

Approach

In its approach to men with the truths of God, there was no doubt as to the message. It is a mark of every recorded sermon (Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul) that both Law and Gospel are boldly set forth. Above all the crucified, but resurrected, Lord is the subject of the good news. "Repent" and "believe" are the keynotes of the gospel invitation. Here was and is the one power for missions, the gospel of the resurrected Redeemer.

The people to whom the early church addressed the gospel fit no one pattern. There appears to be no conscious effort to single out any one group. Paul reached both the high-born (Acts 17:12,34; 18:8) and the lower classes of people (I Cor. 1:26) In apparent contradiction of this statement is the fact that Paul with a degree of consistency would start his work at the synagogue in a new city. This reflects the concern of the church for the chosen people, but in light of the universality of the redemption of Christ indicates no priority for the Jews. It rather is the natural place to begin, with those who know the promises, those Paul could expect to respond. Strangely these were the very groups that provided the trouble-makers for mission activity.

Although Paul took advantage of the logical place in a community for his initial preaching, the synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14; etc.), he and others used private homes (Acts 15:15), the open road (Acts 8:26), a lecture hall (Acts 19:9), the Temple (Acts 5:21), and the market-place (Acts 17:1). The place of preaching and worship did not become a matter of concern in the early years of the church.

It is significant to note that in a sense Paul worked within the religious and political system around him as long as no compromise of his public witness to Christ was involved. He also showed great flexibility in style of approach. Truly he exemplified in the market-place and on Mars hill in Athens his words to the Corinthians (9:27) "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some," and again (10:33) "Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many that they may be saved." He entered a dialogue with pagan philosophers, hearing their questions, meeting them on their ground, but with divine words. He was willing to enter into such a dialogue also with unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), with Jews and Greeks in Corinth (Acts 18:4), and with Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus (Acts 18:19). He was willing to testify from castle steps (Acts 21:40) in royal palaces (Acts 26:1) or in prison halls (Acts 16:32).

Purpose

Paul's purpose in preaching in a certain locality was not only to convert individuals, but to plant a church. In a sense Paul founded churches, not missions. In keeping with the Great Commission he "made disciples" and then followed up with the essentials and marks of a church, baptizing and teaching the Word of God. Upon an early return to a church, such as in Asia Minor, Paul could already ordain elders to feed the flock and prepare them to witness to others. As Peter Gunther reminds us in "The Fields at Home" (p. 17) "The Apostle Paul was not a hit-and-run evangelist. He was concerned about the growth of those who believed his

word." Paul continued his concern for the new churches through return visits and letters in which necessary admonition and encouragement were given.

Paul truly believed in the indigenous church policy. It was to be self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting.

Administration

The early church was concerned that all things be done decently and in order, not merely for order's sake, but that the Lord's work might be done harmoniously and effectively. We note that the early church found it wise to delegate responsibility for material concerns to others than the pastors (Acts 6:2). It also took responsibility for sending out missionaries (Acts 8:14). Its concern for the stability of its missions is shown in the training given the elders by its missionaries (Acts 20:28).

Even in those days it was considered essential for effective and stable mission work that reports be made to the mother church on mission progress (Acts 11:1 – Peter to Jerusalem; Acts 14:27 – Paul and Barnabas to Antioch; Acts 21:19 – Paul to Jerusalem).

There also was communication from the mother church to the mission field in the matter of doctrine and practice (Acts 15:19-29; 16:4 – the decrees of the conference in Jerusalem).

At the conference in Jerusalem, as a result of the mission reports of Barnabas and Paul, a general division of mission fields was agreed upon with Peter, James, and John, the leaders of the mother church.

One would hardly speak of strong centralized administration by the Churches at Jerusalem or Antioch. The newly established churches were bound by their common faith but appear independent in administration. Nevertheless we note that Paul had no hesitation about returning to discipline or writing to admonish even though these churches had their own called shepherds.

Comparisons

When we seek to find a pattern in the methods of the early church in its mission activity we find that the methods are determined by a changing environment in which men with varying resources seek to attain an unchanging objective.

In making a comparison with today's mission methods we shall have to be aware of the areas in which the situations and people are similar or analogous and those in which great differences have developed. We shall probe the subject areas in the order discussed above: Objectives – Planning – Fields – Personnel – Approach – Purpose – Administration.

Today's Objectives

The objective of the Home Mission Division, "To reach unchurched primarily through the establishment of mission congregations," stresses the need to serve all people in our land with the Gospel in view of the universality of the redemptive work and love of the world's Savior. Its prime thrust is to reach the unchurched with the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the aim of converting them to Christianity. The establishment of evangelism goals by our missions underlines our commitment to a Harvest Theology rather than merely a Search Theology.

Although recognizing that the seed of the Word meets varying responses and that patient working in a relatively sterile place is some times required of a church and missionaries faithful to their call and responsibilities, our objective nevertheless reflects the optimism stated by Donald McGavran in "Understanding Church Growth" (p. 62), "We must not be limited by the small expectations of our forebears, nor measure tomorrow's advances by yesterday's defeats." – "Nothing in the Bible or the growth of the New Testament Church supports this assumption (that good growth is necessarily slow and that length of labor guarantees the excellence of the product)." (Ibid., p. 145) It is also true that "sometimes (slow progress) must be endured, but there is no reason to canonize it." (Ibid. p. 145)

Comparison

It is obvious that the continuing objective of Christ's Church dare not change; neither dares that of any program or division within the church. We trust that not only our objective, but our efforts to attain it, demonstrates our harmony with the objective in the mission of the early church.

Today's Planning

Our General Board for Home Missions obviously has committed itself to extensive planning in its mission program. The work is done at all levels with the projection of six year goals by mission congregations and district boards. These help shape the overall strategy of the General Board. The GBHM is very aware of the need to be sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its planning. Prayer for such guidance is a most essential prerequisite for its planning sessions. We feel the Spirit's influence especially now in the role God obviously has for us in American Lutheranism and world Christianity, that of a strong confessional body. The role we have been given shapes decisions as to program and location.

Comparison

Although the early church had direct guidance at times from the Holy Spirit, its missionaries did plan their strategy as do we. We as they, however, find that God often exerts strong pressure for a change in our plans. May we always be sensitive to such pressures which indicate a better way to attain God's objectives in mission work.

Today's Fields

The selection of prospective mission fields by our GBHM is a product of cooperative planning by Synod's members, missionaries, district mission boards and the GBHM. The current strategy is found in the policy statement: "To establish mission congregations primarily in major population centers." It is our stated policy to work primarily where the largest field of winnable unchurched may be found. But we also wish to work from a city which can serve an area both by being a rallying point or confessional outpost as well as a sending center to plant other churches to cover the area more effectively (e.g. Washington, D. C. – Los Angeles – Houston).

The decision to enter an area usually is also prompted by the presence of a nucleus of committed confessional brethren which serves both as a starting point and as a corps of fellow-workers.

Comparison

There are obvious comparisons with the early church in the selection of strategic city centers, in working out from them, in seeking a nucleus as a starting point, in reaching scattered people. We note that the dispersion in the time of the early church resulted from persecution rather than for economic reasons as is the most frequent case today. Our Synod until recent years, however, did not share the strategy of Paul in hurrying outward quickly to cover province after province and then country after country. Perhaps we need give greater consideration also to his desire to preach where the gospel had not yet been proclaimed and his reluctance to build on another's foundation. A degree of tension exists for us in this area because of the deteriorating quality of the proclamation of the gospel in many denominations and because of our proper fellowship concerns. We are sometimes faced with the necessity to locate in the general area of other Lutheran bodies because of these concerns. But even here we avoid giving the appearance of seeking to build on another's foundation or to establish an opposition altar.

Today's Personnel

Our choice of missionaries is restricted to those our church body has declared fit and able in keeping with the Scriptural and Pauline guidelines. We protect the sanctity of the call most carefully while at the same time not hemming it in with human regulations as to what particular body of Christians is competent to call.

Comparison

Again obvious similarities exist especially in our attitude towards the call. We also use men as district missionaries to establish churches in new areas as did Paul. Perhaps we could be more realistic on occasion as was Paul in the case of John Hark in recognizing the shortcomings of an individual as relating to specific mission tasks.

Today's Approach

As to its message the church cannot change. Its message is God-given. We trust that our church will not fall victim to the temptation to change in order to gather in greater numbers. Right now the Lord is giving us the added blessing of seeing growth in numbers just because of our faithfulness in proclaiming His Truth.

We are committed to reaching all people in our land, but in practice we are reaching primarily the upper strata of the working class and lower strata of the middle class. Whether this is a conscious or an unconscious decision or the product of the strategy of beginning to serve an area in large cities is a question worth considering.

Our technique in proclaiming the Gospel includes the desire for early acquisition of a permanent place of worship. We use a rather structured public presentation of the Gospel through the liturgical service. The dialogue approach is reserved for work with individuals. Evangelism efforts by our pastors and laymembers are increasing in number and are part of the GBHM policy.

Comparison

Law and Gospel preaching mark the approach of the early church and of the WELS. Paul's reaching of the high born on occasion and the slaves in many cases does not find frequent parallels in our Synod. The question arises whether our traditional manner of the presentation of the Gospel may be a partial reason. In a few cases we too find that our original nucleus contains "trouble-makers." This happens when members of the nucleus only superficially share our concerns, usually mistaking our confessional "conservatism" for their political, economic, or social conservatism. Public "dialogue" with the world is seldom engaged in by our missionaries. At times this is the result of a mistaken concern for our fellowship position. Dr. Paul Peters in an essay to be delivered soon makes the assertion "Dialogue is a form of apostolic witness demanded by the times" and he quotes the statement of Pierce Beaver in "Communicating the Gospel" that dialogue may be "a form of witness to the Gospel that is more consistent with the spirit of Christ than many methods of the past." Perhaps we need to emulate the flexibility in approach of Paul to a greater degree.

Today's Purpose

Our purpose in witnessing in a specific area is the establishment of a church, not merely a mission or preaching station. We desire a stable, evangelistic congregation, indigenous in the fullest sense of the word. Our goal of self-support in ten years or less is an indication of this purpose.

Comparison

In this point we see little difference with the method of the early church. Our district missionaries, for instance, like Paul are to establish a stable mission capable of growth. They are to bring it to such a state rather

than flit from place to place. Paul traveled extensively and a superficial slavish imitation of him could lead to rather aimless itinerant preaching without the objective or result of stable churches. We too are concerned that able leaders be trained in a mission, spiritually equipped to emulate the Bereans in testing all things with Scripture. We too want churches motivated by the resurrection gospel that reach out to others. Dr. Peters in his essay stresses the necessity of tying our Bible study to evangelism. He notes that the "failure" of many Bible class programs may lie in the fact that they deal more in comfort and strengthening for oneself than in preparation for witnessing. He sees an analogy to this situation noted by Kurt Koch in "The Revival in Indonesia," namely, "A Bible school with no practical outlet soon gets bogged down in theory."

Today's Administration

The administrative lines in our home missions are well known to you, especially those of you in newer missions seeking synod dollars for various projects. You have noted the apparent complexity of administrative detail necessitated by the responsibility of the synod for management of large amounts of money. Nevertheless congregational autonomy remains strong even in our newer missions. Reports to the parent body are an essential (though pesky) part of our mission administration. Communication regarding doctrine and practice between missions and the synod fit into the regular pattern of conferences and districts.

Comparison

Although they were not formalized at first, all of the elements of today's mission administration were present in the early church. Responsibilities were delegated, reports were made to the mother church, conferences were held, supervision of doctrine and practice was exercised. Perhaps we should be more aware of the apostolic decision to delegate more of the material concerns to the laity. Our missionaries often are loaded down with real estate and building responsibilities to a greater degree than necessary. Personal inclination often is the real reason behind a plea of necessity.

Conclusion

Although we do not propose a slavish, literalistic following of the mission methods of the early New Testament Church, we are impressed by how closely we have consciously or not followed the general pattern. Our common objective is the reason for this. Study of the book of Acts and of the Epistles will always provide good basic principles for mission methods. Let us be ever aware, however, of Paul's flexibility in approach and method even during his short but most successful missionary career. Note his quick response to the guidance of the Lord. External circumstances and inner motivations both shaped his plans.

As stated by Harold Lindsell in "Missionary Principles and Practice" (p. 26), "Missions are at the crossroads. They have always been at the crossroad, and this is a cause for rejoicing." Our home mission program is at the crossroads as well. This is made apparent to us by the opportunities being opened to us by God. The "crossroads" are where things are happening and where decisions must be made. Let us examine the happenings carefully and then decide on the road or method best able to enable us to reach our objective "to serve all people in our land with the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

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