

# Establishing New Converts in Church Planting: The Pauline Model

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*ABSTRACT*—Church planting may be said to be as old as Christianity itself. However, the outstanding church planter seems to be Paul the Apostle who happened to earn the cognomen ‘Second Founder of Christianity’ in Church history. However, the reality on ground is that church planters of today, unlike Paul, are not making it. Consequently, the study sought to unearth the reasons behind the accomplishments of Paul. This inquiry has made known that success or failure, in the realm of evangelism in general and church planting in particular, is contingent on the methods employed. Therefore, this paper argues that the key to church planting resides not only in spending longer periods with the new converts but also encompasses visitations of the evangelist, delegation of associates, appointment of elders, and writing of timely letters in order to provide the necessary spiritual mentorship.

*Keywords:* Converts, Church Planting, Established, Evangelism, Paul, Stay.

## I. Introduction

Church planting appears to be a delicate task. In fact, planting a church is one thing but sustaining it is another thing altogether. Many are the churches that have been planted in various areas, but,

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unfortunately, they have not been able to stand the test of time. Most of these churches have been established consecutively to some evangelistic campaigns that usually last less than one month. Experience has revealed that many of such churches disintegrate shortly after they are founded; hence, the need to unearth the reasons behind such a phenomenon. To arrive at this, the paper aims at tackling the issue from the Pauline perspective of church planting that seemed to be more effective.

In Acts 13 through 21, the activities of Paul and his co-workers established the first church planting movement. This approach demonstrates a church planting methodology that is flexible, financially lean and yields lasting results. His work took place in a socio-cultural context similar to our own. This paper employs a theological approach to achieving its objective. The purpose of this study is (1) to survey the current trend of church planting procedure at establishing new converts, (2) to glean some tips that undergirded the success of Paul in terms of church planting and membership establishment. These aforementioned points will constitute the trajectory of this study.

## **II. A Survey of the Current Trend of Church Planting Procedure**

The Seventh-day Adventist church encourages the planting of new churches after holding evangelistic meetings in a given area (*Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook*, 2009, p. 97). This is a commendable initiative in its own right since it is an indicator of the fulfillment of the Gospel Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:47-49; John 21:21-23; Acts 1:8). C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Elmer Towns corroborate this fact when they state that the Great Commission implies that church planting is the primary method to evangelize the world (Wagner, Arn, Towns, 1988, p. 143). In the same vein, Ikechukwu Ugo argues that though the Great Commission does not explicitly mention church planting, it implies it by the very nature of the command to make disciples (Ugo, 2012).

Church planting is a laudable enterprise. However, it remains that the way this noble activity is being implemented appears problematic. In fact, churches are usually planted using what Samuel Koranteng-Pipim terms the bait-and-hook method (Koranteng-Pipim, 2001, pp. 572, 573). This method consists of using gospel entertainments and gimmicks in order to hook the people with the gospel. These

gimmicks may include demagogic promises, a dilution of the Gospel truth, and even the charisma of the preacher. Once the people accept the gospel message after a few days of preaching, the new converts are prematurely abandoned without any spiritual mentorship. It follows that these proselytes find themselves weaned spiritually in a precipitated manner. Since no provision is usually made to provide a proper follow-up, the result becomes less encouraging for other future evangelistic engagements. In his diatribe against the Jewish Religious leaders of his time, Jesus had this to say: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matt 23: 15) (Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are from the New American Version [NASB]).

This passage seems to apply well to the church leaders of today. In fact, a cursory look at the prevailing situation gives a hint that the interest is not on the spiritual establishment of the new converts, but rather on numerical consciousness. In other words, most Church leaders are concerned only about loading the Church’s Record Book instead of putting adequate measures in place to cater for the flock. No wonder, in order to win the applause of humans, some Pastors usually send inflated and complacent reports to whom they are accountable to. Nonetheless, no care is ever taken to ensure a spiritual nurturing of the people. This insinuates that concern for quality church membership is relegated to the background. Therefore, one can barely be surprised by the morbid ambience prevailing currently in our churches. For lack of appropriate spiritual nourishment, most church members seem to have contracted what may be termed as ‘spiritual kwashiorkor’ (which is a type of severe child malnutrition). It goes without saying that all the gossip, the backbiting, the murmuring, and the like gangrening Christendom today seem to be nothing but symptoms of such a spiritual malnourishment caused by a gross neglect of responsibilities. Worse still, Church records are not updated. Therefore, accurate data on church membership cannot be made available for proper planning and implementation. This fact betrays the lack of concern of those who have been charged to ensure the spiritual welfare of God’s church. Ellen G. White was right when she cautioned that the work should not be left prematurely (White, 1946, p. 337).

A brief evaluation of the modern tendency of Church planting has shown the problematic nature of the methodology employed in the

process. Newly planted churches are being forsaken hastily in order to plant new ones. As a result of this, Church's spiritual growth is lagging behind. Since the success of newly established churches is contingent upon how they have been set up, examining Paul's pattern would be salutary.

### **III. Paul's Model in Church Planting**

Paul presents a picturesque model for establishing new converts in church planting process. The presentation may be observed by appreciating his understanding of and commitment to his call as an apostle of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1, 16-17).

#### **A. The Call and Ministerial Self-Consciousness of the Apostle**

Paul's Damascus experience defined his entire life and aspirations. This experience consisted in his conversion and call (Acts 9:15). As his writings have shown, Paul understood that salvation is found only in Christianity (Rom 1:16; 3:22-24; 1 Thess 5:9). Therefore, his call to the ministry was to bring this gospel of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Rom 1:16). This experience may have affected his self-understanding, theological views, and goals (Betz, vol. 5, 1992, p. 187).

Paul was conscious of his apostolate. He preached the gospel to people and that made him an evangelist (Rom 15:16). He presented Christ as the foundation of his ministry so that his audience would not celebrate him the preacher (1 Cor 1:12-13, 23; 3:10). He considered himself a teacher (1 Cor 4:17). After establishing a community of believers, he would teach them how to honor God daily with their lives (Rom 8:8). As one who has been officially appointed and sent to bring the gospel, he deemed it necessary to present some fruits of his labor (2 Cor 3:3). To him, community of believers shall be reminded to remain sanctified to be self-propagating and be able to inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; 1 Tim 6:19). It can be postulated that Paul was conscious of his work as an evangelist who had to preach, nurture his community of believers to live a life for the kingdom of God. To be able to have a fulfilled ministry, Paul had to take a deliberate and a conscious effort to establish his converts. In

what follows, we delve into Paul's strategies in establishing his converts.

## **B. Paul's Strategies in Establishing New Converts**

The book of Acts exhibits three remarkable missionary journeys made by Paul. The first is found in Acts 13-14; the second can be traced from 15:35 to 18:22; and the third in 18:23 to 21:17. In all of these journeys, Paul with his associates established community of believers. Paul employed some notable strategies during his journeys.

On his first journey, Paul and Barnabas left Syria Antioch, their church base, to proclaim the Gospel in Cyprus, Salamis, Paphos, Perga in Pamphylia, and in several cities in southern Galatia, namely, Pisidia Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (13:4-14-26). It is worth noting that they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidia Antioch after some time and confirmed the believers in the faith. They appointed elders for the believers in these cities (14:21-23). All these activities happened in this journey. Luke does not mention a specific length of stay during this journey. But it can be postulated that Paul with his associate(s) spent some quality years there, considering the number of cities he preached in and the activities that took place there (see also Carson, Moo, and Morris, p. 227). Returning to strengthen already established churches and appointing leaders for these churches might have been Paul's conscious strategies to establish the new converts in the faith (Metzger, 2003, p. 229).

His second missionary journey was more of a follow-up and nurturing of the converts gained during the previous journey (15:36, 41; 16:4-5) as the basis for further outreach. Chap. 15: 36,41 state: "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are' . . . He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Via this trip, Paul showed love and concern for his converts. This passage vividly indicates that Paul and Barnabas followed the itinerary of the first visit. It becomes obvious that Paul's concern was not only to establish new churches, but he also had in mind those already set up. This was a conscious effort consented by both evangelists to anchor the embryonic faith of their spiritual children. Through southern Galatia and Asia Minor, Paul with his associates travelled to Macedonia and then Achaia, including Athens and Corinth (16:6-18:18). When Paul's stay was cut short in Thessalonica and Berea due to persecution, Timothy and Silas were

left there to straighten out what was left unfinished (17:2,14; 18:5;1 Thess 3:6). And Paul stayed in Corinth for a period of eighteen months (Acts 18:11). He moved to Jerusalem through Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla. When he briefly preached in Ephesus, he left the couple there and travelled to his final destination (Acts 18:19). But he promised to return to the believers in Ephesus (v. 21). It may, therefore, be pointed out that whenever Paul could not stay longer in a specific place for one reason or the other, he made sure that he left one of his associates with whom the people could easily identify themselves. Again, he revisited the new converts in the already established churches.

On the third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus as he promised. According to Acts account, he ministered in this city for almost three years (19:8,10; 20:31). As far as we know, this is the longest stay Paul had in one city. From this place, he moved to Macedonia through Corinth to meet Titus and receive report about the Corinthian believers (20:1; 2 Cor 2:12-13). It is believed that first Corinthians was written in Ephesus while second Corinthians was written in Macedonia in response to Titus's report (1 Cor 16:8; 2 Cor 2:12-13; 7:5; 8:1-5; 9:2). Owing to his peripatetic missionary activities, Paul used letters to establish his personal presence from a distance (cf. 1 Cor 5:3). In writing letters to address the needs of his audience, he recognized them as 'saints' in Jesus Christ even though the state of the community, as at the time of writing, was not commendable (1 Cor 1:2). He also addresses them as 'my children' (4:14; 2 Cor 6:13; Gal 4:18-20). The parental language used may depict a very close and eternal relationship firmly anchored in Christ (Cairns, 1981, pp.64-65).

More than half of the NT's epistles are attributed to Paul. These letters are considered occasional. For example, due to the persecution he suffered in Thessalonica, he had to write letters to encourage the new converts and reshape their theological understanding (1 Thess 3:5-6; 2 Thess 2:1-4). Even though he had had a long and uninterrupted stay with the Corinthian converts, he addressed them as 'infants' in Christ (1 Cor 3:1). Their behavior betrayed this description Paul gave. The church still needed some clarifications on their belief and practice (7:1-24; vv. 25-40; 8:1-11:1; 12:1-14:40). He wrote to the church to bring them on track so that their belief and practice could be firmly rooted in Christ (1:17; 3:11; 6:15; 15:3). He became very personal when he wrote to Philemon to accept Onesimus back (vv. 10-12). By this letter, Paul taught Philemon to treat his slave

as a brother (v. 16). It appears that, aside the personal visits to churches, Paul used letters “to oversee the spiritual growth of the new congregations” (Metzger, p. 249).

Several strategies may be identified. First, Paul spent some quality time with his new converts teaching them to live Christian lives. Second, he intentionally made a followed-up to his previous missionary activities in several cities to confirm the converts in the faith. Third, he assigned his associates to some churches to straighten out some unfinished business when he could not be there for one reason or the other. Fourth, he appointed elders to continue upholding the living truth of the gospel and guide the converts. Finally, Paul used letters as a means of communication in establishing his personal presence from a distance. All in all, he looked beyond baptismal figures. With these strategies, he hoped to continue establishing the converts in the faith till Jesus comes.

### **C. Imitating Paul’s Model in Establishing New Converts**

Paul is so significant a figure in the New Testament and in the church’s history that he has been called the second founder of Christianity (Carson, Moo, and Morris, 1992, p. 215). Roland Allen points out that many missionaries in later days have won a larger number of converts than Paul. With the help of technology, many have even preached to a wider area than he did; but no one has surpassed him in terms of establishing churches (Allen, 1962, p.3). It follows that learning from such a monumental figure cannot be out of order. In fact, Ugo sees Paul to be the greatest pioneer church planter of all time. Herbert Kane postulates that Paul’s success may be credited, among others, to the fact that he remained long enough in one place to establish a church (Kane, 1976, p. 82). White is supportive of this when she admonishes that church planters must see to it that all are intelligent in the truth, established in the faith, and interested in every branch of the work, before leaving them for another field (White, p. 337). F. S. Hewitt understood this when he remarked that no one was more aware of the danger of making new disciples and then leaving them to their own immature beliefs and practices than Paul (Hewitt, 1964, p. 222). David J. Bosch, quoting Malherbe (1987: 52), states that Paul’s method of shaping a community was to gather converts around himself and by his own behavior to demonstrate what he taught (Bosch, 1991, p. 132). This suggests that there is a price to pay for a proselyte to be rooted in his

or her new found faith. This includes spending a quality time with the new converts and maintaining any form of contact in order to provide them with spiritual leadership and mentorship. Paul seems to have understood this paramount lesson because, in the course of his ministry spotlighted with church planting, he always strived to maintain physical contact with the people in various ways.

A maximum of one month is allotted for evangelistic campaigns in West Africa, precisely Ghana. The success of the campaigns is usually measured by the baptismal figures. In many cases, the converts are left in the care of local churches to continue the process of establishment. Some of the converts get baptized for several reasons. For example, some converts fall ‘in love’ with evangelists’ personality and style. When evangelists leave the scene, such converts can easily leave. If the evangelists stay on for some time and maintain some form of contact, the reason for their conversion can be reshaped and redirected to Christ. It should be mentioned that in the course of the evangelistic campaigns, evangelists and converts naturally establish some kind of relationship. So, if evangelists leave the converts immediately after the campaign, the converts find it difficult to adjust to another kind of relationship that will continue to nurture them. Therefore, it becomes necessary that evangelists, be it local or international, must have a conscious plan to establish converts in the faith well as Paul did.

Unfortunately, the reality on ground is far from being encouraging. Not only there are no adequate strategies put in place to ensure the establishment of new converts, but also there are no statistical records available to keep church leaders on track. In the process of gathering data to substantiate our assertions, we were stunned to know that both the local Conferences and the Union could not provide any statistical records regarding the maintenance of new converts. Consequently, this paper does not attempt to make any authoritative claim concerning any dropouts. Notwithstanding, testimonies from some evangelists and leaders of evangelistic groups suffice to justify any avowal made about inadequate follow-up approaches. The interest of this paper lies in the quality of believers that are born out of evangelistic campaigns. While maintenance of baptismal figures of the new converts is necessary, establishing them in the faith becomes equally significant. For instance, on April 8-21, 2012, an evangelistic campaign was conducted by a renowned evangelist in Tema Community One in Ghana. Almost nine hundred (900) souls were baptized. Consecutively, the new converts were left under the

auspices and care of the nearby Seventh-day Adventist churches. It follows that since then the converts do not have the privilege to fellowship with their spiritual father (i.e., the preacher). Besides, upon hearing one of the leaders of the few recognized evangelistic groups at Valley View University called 'Announce,' the following follow-up measures can be noted: (1) Few members of the evangelistic team are left for some days, (2) Local church elders and district pastor are being put in charge of the new converts, or (3) Likely visit of the preacher himself.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the approaches employed by the people concerned are lacking effectiveness. It follows that new converts most often find themselves in a lonely condition that is not helpful to their spiritual growth.

In the same perspective, Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf observed that during the final years of the existence of the Trans-Africa Division which was led by non-Africans, an unprecedented number of membership loss was recorded even though the church numerical growth was exponential (Schwarz, Greenleaf, 2000, p. 601). They added that after the formation of the Africa-Indian Ocean and East-Central Africa divisions headed by national leadership, both divisions reported dramatic declines in loss rates. Therefore, it cannot be gainsaid that converts are likely to brave the Christian challenges and remain in the Church when they are mentored by leaders they may easily relate to. The issue is that the missionaries who help to establish churches all over the places in Africa do not usually stay for so long a time with their converts to mentor them spiritually. The absence of such intercourse has caused a lot of harm to the survival of several churches. Conscious of the foregoing, Paul did not stop there; he always ensured that he ordained elders (Acts 14: 23) as custodians of the various churches established. By this, Paul shows that maintaining a physical contact with new converts is vital in the field of church planting. Ugo believes that Paul demonstrated that missionary work should not be done on a hit and run basis. Unfortunately, this has become the order of the day. The fortifying aspect of new converts is critically lacking in evangelistic outreach of the church. It is worth noting that Paul used any good means to preserve a strong connection with the newly established churches through the sending of letters which aimed at addressing their main concerns. Of all the strategies mentioned above, the physical presence of Paul among the people seems to be the most determinant factor that led to his success as a master church planter.

Several proposals can be made to tackle the apparent shortcomings in establishing new converts in the faith. First, if the place to be evangelized is a virgin area, it may be biblically imperative that the evangelist follows the model of Paul in staying longer and maintaining some sort of a parental connection with the converts. The evangelist may work with associate(s) to temporarily fill in when he or she leaves for emergency. If it becomes necessary that he or she moves to another virgin area after a long period (e.g., two years), some able and passionate leaders may be appointed to continue establishing the members. It may be required of the evangelist to visit once a while to oversee the spiritual health of the church. It may be advisable to use several 21st century communication media, namely, telephone, cell phone, electronic mailing, and conventional mailing. These media can be employed by the evangelist to establish his or her presence and connection with the members.

Second, seminars can be organized for young and potential evangelists in the local setting. If there is a church in the area where the evangelism is to take place, using the indigenes may be practical. Paul makes clear that to be an evangelist is a spiritual gift (Eph 4:11; cf. Acts 21:8; 2 Tim 4:5). If so, young people with the gift can be identified and groomed to minister in their settings. They can have all the time with the new converts. Using the local or indigenes may even help cut down the cost of engaging the ministry of international evangelists. Anyway, the harvest is plenteous so more laborers are needed (Matt 9:37-38).

Third, the plan for establishing new converts in Acts-2000 evangelistic campaign has been considered as noble. Before the international evangelist (Mark Finley) started his public campaign, the local conference in Kumasi, Ghana, engaged all the members of the church to embark on house-to-house visitation for a month. This may have prepared the converts for the ministry of the evangelist. The baptismal figures were so huge that two different church buildings had to be constructed purposely for the new converts. Passionate leaders of the evangelistic groups were charged to nurture and establish the converts in the faith after the evangelist had left. Though there was some numerical drop, the remaining few have been described as committed to the faith in Christ.

## IV. Conclusion

This paper has embarked on a theological study that aimed at establishing the point that the Pauline model should be the prototype and yardstick of church planting. This is imperative because carrying out the Gospel Commission and church planting cannot be disassociated from each other. It follows that establishing new churches becomes the ‘raison d’être’ (meaning “purpose of existence”) of the church in the process of fulfilling this noble task of saving souls. However, an investigation into church planting practice has underscored the fact that the hit and run method commonly used is not rewarding. Paul employed several methods in order to achieve his evangelistic objectives. These strategies include the followings: urban evangelism marked with church planting; follow-up, team evangelism, training of leaders, and maintaining contact. If indeed all these strategies were used by Paul to be the most successful church planter ever, this study holds that the apostle owes his unprecedented achievement first to his prolonged stay with his new converts, then to his routine of delegating associates, appointing elders in every church, and writing of occasional letters to address their concerns.

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