



Establishing a Presence in Church Planting

Editor's note: This article has been adapted from the Midwest Church Extension Church Planting Curriculum.

There is a proliferation of “how to” books and manuals on the market today for just about anything you may want to do. A television commercial announcer now tells us that “children don’t come with user manuals ... until now,” and then he goes on to tout the latest manual on child rearing which focuses on changing rebellious behavior so that “you can have your life back again.”

When it comes to the ministry of church planting, a plethora of resource material in the marketplace is available as well. The Scriptures, however, must be the touchstone that determines the validity and usefulness of any of that material. In that vein, the one who wrote the “manual” would have to be the Apostle Paul, and the lion’s share of that manual would be found in the book of Acts.

One important church planting principle gleaned from Paul’s ministry example at the Greek city of Thessalonica is that of establishing a marked physical presence in the community and among the people whom one wishes to reach.

A MARKED PHYSICAL PRESENCE

Of the ten verses in the Thessalonian narrative account in Acts 17, four of them speak directly about the physical presence of the team in that city:

(v.1) “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews.”

(v.2) “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures.”

(v.4) “And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.”

(v.6) “And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, these that have turned the world upside down are come here also.”

The Thessalonian epistles also make specific references to the team’s presence among these people who would ultimately become this new local church.

(1 Thessalonians 1:5) “For our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance; as you know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.”

(1 Thessalonians 3:2) “And sent Timothy, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith.”

(2 Thessalonians 2:5) “Remember, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?”

The significance of the contribution that a physical presence has in the establishment of a church cannot be overestimated. Found within the examples cited above are several crucial dimensions to ministry without which the planting of a local church cannot occur.

INSERTION

Acts 17:1 says that Paul and his team “came to Thessalonica,” and in 17:2 Paul “went in unto” the synagogue to confront the Jews with the truths of Scripture. Paul was diligent about fulfilling the Great Commission as expressed by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15. The instructions of the Lord in both cases include the Aorist participle translated “go,” used with the attendant circumstance¹ to the main verbs of “teach” (Matthew) and “preach” (Mark). Some would argue the assumption of a contemporaneous use of time with the particles, thus having the force of “while you are going, teach all nations” (Matthew) and “while you are going, preach the Gospel” (Mark). In either case, the use of this participle propels the disciple of Jesus Christ into the world wherein dwell the people to whom he is sent. It is abundantly clear that the going of the witness for Christ is intrinsic to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It is not possible to disciple someone with whom I am not present. It takes the insertion of the witness to the field of mission; this dimension thus clearly contributed to the origination part of the establishment process.

Lesson: Clearly, God uses all sorts of avenues by which He brings people to himself. However, no church planting – indeed, no bearing of any witness for Christ – can take place without the deliberate and obedient act of going to the next community or individual that is in need of the Gospel witness.

CONSISTENCY

Acts 17:2 says that Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue for three Sabbath days. It is significant that Paul did not make just one effort with the Gospel message only to turn away from the Jewish Thessalonians upon their rejection of his message. Rather he was consistently present in their midst, seeking to persuade them to believe on Jesus Christ. Paul, being very systematic in his approach to ministry, built a case for the Gospel with each encounter; and for his words to carry any weight of credibility, it needed the support of his consistent presence in the midst of his countrymen.

Lesson: Church planting is, by its very definition, a direct attempt to engage lost souls. Yet, such attempts will not be without vigorous resistance. Those who are easily discouraged or prone to give up looking for an easier way will not find success. Indeed, their actions are likely to make it more difficult for those who follow in their wake.

AVAILABILITY

After some of the Thessalonians came to faith in Christ, Acts 17:4 states that they “consorted with Paul and Silas.” The word translated “consort with” is one rich in meaning, though not well communicated in many English translations. Most translations have this verb expressed in the active voice; the word in the Greek is not active, but it is passive. The action described is one performed upon these believers, not performed by them. The word is *proskleroō* and is defined by Thayer as meaning “to make a lot, i.e. a heritage, private possession.”² Adding the passive voice makes the expression better read, “were made a heritage (or an allotment) to Paul and Silas.” In other words, the laborer’s fruit of ministry was the heritage of souls, not for ownership but for a stewardship of responsibility. By being

not only messengers of the Gospel, but also by being the servants present and available to which these new believers could be united, Paul and Silas made this the actual point of origin in establishing this new local church.

OBVIOUSNESS

Many things are learned from Acts 17:6; and one of those things is how obvious the presence of Paul and his team was in Thessalonica. When unbelievers set their intent to harm God’s servants, the Scripture says that Paul and his team could not be found. Their presence seemingly had evaporated! Yet when it came time for allegations to be leveled, it was their presence and its impact that was cited. The ones who turned the world upside down had come to Thessalonica! The reputation of previous ministry had obviously preceded the team; and that God had moved through the team at Thessalonica was obvious as well, for even the enemy acknowledged it. An identity as a local church had been struck, and the fear of its existence implies that a measure of stabilization was now underway.

Lesson: The ministry of church planting is not a “covert operation.” To permeate a community with the testimony of Christ, one needs to achieve a level of visibility in ministry that will command recognition from those in the community about the work that God is doing. Of course, we must take care that such recognition is of what God is doing and not we ourselves.

TANGIBILITY

Paul made a very telling statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:5 when he forced their recall of his past teaching done while in their presence. The teaching about the order of events surrounding the return of Christ needed reinforcement by the Apostle. In order to do that, Paul asked them to go back in their minds’ eyes, and remember when they heard him teach on this subject. No doubt when reading these words, the Thessalonian believers that heard Paul’s instruction struck immediate associations of when this took place. Perhaps they recalled the setting, or the circumstance, or the tone, or some other correlating mnemonic to the teaching of this particular truth.

Whatever the association, Paul’s presence in their midst brought a degree of tangibility so that when the recall was needed, he could command it.

Lesson: It is the personal experiences which form these memories that serve as a cohesive force binding spiritual truth to one’s mind. When people have the opportunity to see a planter model what he teaches; when they can read the earnestness of his expressions and hear the love and graciousness of his tone of speech, the truth of what he says will more quickly be embedded in their souls and will more permanently stay there.

CONCLUSION

Thus, having a marked physical presence was absolutely crucial to the planting of this local church. In a day such as our own when so many Christians are inherently disconnected from the engagement of actual ministry, we are challenged to see that how God moved upon the world through Paul was directly proportionate to his presence in his mission field. Not a single dimension above could have been accomplished from afar; God directed Paul to enter Thessalonica, and used him to plant a new local church. Keeping these things in mind will greatly enhance our efforts with Vision America as well.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dana, H. E. and Mantey, Julius R., *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 228.
- 2 Thayer, Joseph Henry, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), p. 547.