CHURCH REVITALIZATION:
INSIGHTS FROM THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

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APPROVAL SHEET

CHURCH REVITALIZATION:
INSIGHTS FROM THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

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PREFACE

While this project bears my name, I could not have completed it without the sacrifice and contribution of many others. Chuck Lawless, my supervising professor, has continuously pushed me to better myself academically and spiritually for the glory of God. I would have never begun this project, much less completed it, without his confidence and willingness to invest in me as a student. Professors Timothy Beougher and Adam Greenway have also contributed to this project by offering valuable insights along the way. Thank you both for speaking difficult truths in love.

Throughout this work, my family and friends have amazed me with their servant hearts and attitudes. Without their loving sacrifice and many prayers, completing this project may have taken years longer. Dr. Bob and Karen Miller have been especially supportive of me with their prayers, wisdom, and financial support from the beginning. Thank you all for believing in me and helping me along the way.

No words could ever express how thankful I am to my wife and children. I realize that each of you gave far more than any of us ever imagined when we began. Maggie and Sam, I especially appreciate the understanding you demonstrated to let me go back to the office all those nights. This project is over, Dad is done with school, and we are going to have a lot of fun making up for lost times. Steph, I love you now more than ever and look forward to spending the rest of my life serving the Lord with you.
Finally, the greatest credit for the completion of this work belongs to God. Night after night thoughts came, insightful quotes were found, and research discoveries were made. I pray now that God will use this work to strengthen his church, advance his kingdom here on earth, and bring glory to himself.

Brandon Edward Conner

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2012
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 Rick Warren published *The Purpose Driven Church* that profoundly shaped the way many evangelicals thought about and went about doing church. The book proved to be so influential that it was listed among the top “100 Christian Books That Changed the 20th Century.”\(^1\) In the introductory chapter of this watershed publication, Warren declared, “I believe the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church health, not church growth. That’s what this book is really about.”\(^2\) Warren’s book was about the purposes of worship, ministry, evangelism, discipleship, and fellowship—but primarily about balancing those purposes related to church health. At its core, Warren’s book was an attempt to call evangelicals to pay attention to church health issues.

Unfortunately, the health of the American church has improved little since Warren’s publication. For example, in 2010 the Barna Group’s research yielded six discoveries about Christianity in America. Sadly, the Barna Group found that “the influence of Christianity on culture and individual lives is largely invisible.”\(^3\)

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Additionally, researcher Lillian Kwon reported in 2010 that in the United States approximately 3,500 churches close their doors each year.\(^4\) In addition to churches that die, approximately 80 percent of churches in America today have either reached a plateau or have experienced a numerical decline in their average weekly attendance.\(^5\)

When one considers the population growth occurring in America, the lack of growth in the American church becomes even more concerning. In his book *The American Church in Crisis*, David Olson reported in 2008 that “the population of the United States has grown by 52 million people from 1990 to 2006 . . . . While this robust growth in the number of Americans has taken place, no growth in church attendance has occurred! In 1990, 52 million people attended worship each week—in 2006 the number remained unchanged.”\(^6\) The U.S. Census Bureau projects the population in America to increase to 520 million in 2050.\(^7\) If current trends continue, only sixty million of those are expected to attend church each week, a decrease in percentage of the population from 20.4 percent to 11.7 percent.\(^8\) These statistics are concerning and suggest that the American church is indeed unhealthy.


\(^5\)Ibid.

\(^6\)David Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 35-36.


\(^8\)Ibid.
One way that some leaders have sought to address the health of American churches is through utilizing church consultants. Consultants like Tom Bandy, George Bullard, Ken Callahan, Paul Dietterich, Bill Easum, John Ellas, Kent Hunter, Gary McIntosh, Loren Mead, Dan Reeves, and John Savage work with American churches to improve health and thus seek to increase effectiveness.

While the work of church consultants is admirable, and often helpful, much room for improvement in this discipline remains. Will Mancini, who estimates between three thousand and seven thousand active consultants in North America today, participated in a consultation survey for the Society for Church Consulting in 2010. He believes many of those doing consulting today “have not been trained or have little experience,” and that “The Society [for Church Consulting] must be careful not to send out ill-equipped consultants, just as Bible colleges and seminaries need to be careful about sending ill-equipped pastors.”

Those organizations involved in consultant training often give little attention to the Scriptures; at best, they assume rather than assert a biblical foundation and scriptural guidance for their work. Instead, they focus on issues such as church leadership, growth barriers, finances, congregational and community analysis, strategic planning, staff performance, acquiring clients, and writing final reports. This omission of biblical and

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10The Society for Church Consulting currently offers five levels of training. These training materials are available on DVD from: “Training and Resources” (Louisville, KY) [on-line]; accessed 10 April 2011, available from http://www.churchconsultation.org/training___resources; Internet. The five levels of training focus on the practical issues mentioned above. Additionally, Bill Easum trains consultants by utilizing case studies and training in data analysis. Further information on his training can
theological insights for church health and church revitalization is regrettable, particularly because the ministry of the apostle Paul—though he himself was not a church consultant as the role is understood today—still offers a model and guidance for those interested in the needed task of church revitalization.

Thesis

The apostle Paul has been credited with filling many important roles in his ministry. Some have stressed that Paul was an exemplary missionary, traveling the world to make Christ known at the ends of the earth, while also recognizing him as a theologian who penned great doctrines of the Christian faith for all to study and learn.\textsuperscript{11} Others have chosen to emphasize the apostle Paul as a church planter who traveled from city to city, sharing Christ and planting churches that could carry on the task of fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).\textsuperscript{12} This dissertation affirms these roles for Paul, while also arguing that his ministry offers insights for revitalizing struggling churches.

Even more specifically, this dissertation seeks to show that, while Paul addressed specific issues in the churches to whom he wrote, he generally addressed three key sets of factors that contribute to a church’s health—factors that Donald McGavran, founder of the Church Growth Movement, would later recognize as significant in church

\footnotesize{be found at 21st Century Strategists (Port Arnansas, TX: 2011) [on-line]; accessed 10 April 2011, available from http://churchconsultations.com/services/church-consultant-training-online/; Internet.}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Daniel Akin, \textit{A Theology for the Church} (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), vii.
\item Ed Stetzer, \textit{Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age} (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 39.
\end{enumerate}
growth. First, Paul wrote to churches about contextual factors which must be addressed in order for the church to reach its community. McGavran has defined contextual factors as, “political, sociological, cultural, and environmental factors over which the church or the mission has no control.” Second, Paul wrote to churches about institutional factors that affect church health. Institutional factors are factors within the church which “the church or denomination can control.”

Third, Paul addressed spiritual factors that contribute to the overall health and effectiveness of churches. Spiritual factors are unique in that they involve the work of God who is sovereign, and are not subject to contextual or institutional factors. In order for church leaders and consultants to help churches experience revitalization, they must not ignore these factors in their analysis and subsequent recommendations.

**Background**

My interest in the revitalization of American churches began and continued throughout my M.Div. studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. After earning an undergraduate degree in Speech and Communications, I had moved to Louisville so I could continue preparing for Christian

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13Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 19. In this book, McGavran argued, “As we look at any case of growth or nongrowth, whether it be a local church or an entire denomination, we find that understanding it involves consideration of three important sets of factors.” The sets of factors which McGavran speaks of, as noted in this paragraph, are contextual factors, institutional factors, and spiritual factors. While Paul does not label these factors as McGavran does, both address the same sets of issues as one seeks to improve the health of the church locally and globally. To review McGavran’s role in the Church Growth Movement, see Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 19-40.

14Ibid.

15Ibid.

16Ibid.
ministry. Upon arrival, I enrolled in the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth where I began learning theological and practical concepts employed to improve evangelistic effectiveness in established local churches.

In addition to being introduced to church growth concepts and literature during my first semester, I also met Chuck Lawless, the second dean of the Billy Graham School. Early in my seminary education, Lawless invited me to enter into a mentoring relationship with him. Over the next three years, I traveled regularly with him as he taught at churches or lectured at seminaries and conventions about issues that affected the health of the local church. These experiences deepened my understanding of church health issues, but they also created in me a love for local churches. Watching my mentor invest in the health of local churches, both big and small, powerfully shaped my interest in church health.

After graduating from Southern Seminary, I accepted a pastorate at CrossRoads Baptist Church in Thomasville, Georgia. Although the church was only four years old when I became their pastor, they had already experienced a plateau in their numerical growth. The founding pastor was a church planter at heart. Once the planting phase was complete, he struggled to gain a new vision for this congregation and moved to mid-town Atlanta to plant again. As a young, energetic pastor, I longed to see this church revitalized under my leadership.

My desire to lead this church to evangelistic effectiveness was intensified by a book I read early in my pastorate: *Courageous Leadership* by Bill Hybels. In a chapter entitled “The Stakes of Leadership,” Hybels tells the story of a violent young man he encountered at an international airport. In the aftermath of his encounter with this
troubled adolescent, Hybels sat in his seat on the plane and reflected on the trajectory of this young man’s life, concluding,

Businessmen can provide sorely needed jobs. Wise educators can teach useful knowledge of the world. Self-help programs can offer effective methods of behavior modification. Advanced psychological techniques can aid self-understanding. And all of this is good. But can any of it truly transform the human heart? I believe that only one power exists on this sorry planet that can do that. It’s the power of the love of Jesus Christ, the love that conquers sin and wipes out shame and heals wounds and reconciles enemies and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life at a time. And what grips my heart every day is the knowledge that the radical message of that transforming love has been given to the church. That means that in a very real way the future of the world rests in the hands of local congregations like yours and mine.17

I became convinced early in my first pastorate, and remain convinced today, that too much is at stake for churches to remain ineffective. I wanted to see not only my church revitalized, but I wanted to see other churches revitalized as well.

My desire to see other churches revitalized prompted me to pursue training as a church consultant through Church Central in Louisville, Kentucky.18 Shortly after receiving my certification as a church consultant, I joined a consulting firm as Vice-President of Consulting Services. This firm is a church and denominational consulting firm that has afforded me numerous opportunities to work with churches of all types.19 In most cases, the churches with whom we work are unhealthy, and in some cases are at a point of crisis. While every church is different, it is common to see churches experience greater effectiveness after implementing suggestions from outsiders who have analyzed their operations with fresh eyes and a thorough understanding of church health issues.

18Church Central (Louisville, KY: 2011) [on-line]; http://www.churchcentral.com; Internet.
19The Lawless Group (Henrico, VA: 2011) [on-line]; http://thelawlessgroup.com; Internet.
These first-hand experiences have given me great hope for struggling churches.

In our work with churches, we provide a summary of our findings and subsequent recommendations in a written report. As we examine the health of a church, we compare the churches with whom we work with the New Testament understanding of a healthy church. The reports we write include recommendations that are grounded in Scripture. Early in my consulting ministry, this practice helped me to consider how much the Bible has to say about issues that affect church health even in the twenty-first century. The more I studied the New Testament church, the more I began to see that the record of Paul’s ministry to churches can help inform church consultants today as they work with congregations. Though the apostle was not a consultant, his works nevertheless offer insights for improving the health of American churches.

My interest in church health and church revitalization continued to grow when I enrolled in Southern Seminary’s Doctor of Philosophy program. I concentrated my studies on the areas of evangelism and church growth and eventually took a church planting colloquium with J. D. Payne. During the colloquium, I argued that America has enough churches and that our primary focus should be on revitalizing existing churches rather than planting new ones. Throughout the course, Payne frequently reminded me of the words of C. Peter Wagner, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.” In addition to my professor, classmates suggested to me, “it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead,” a slogan commonly used to advocate for church planting over the hard work of revitalizing churches. While I

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eventually developed a greater appreciation for church planting, the friction I encountered in that course forced me to think about and defend the need to revitalize churches.

I also currently work at a small private college where I interact with 18-22 year olds on a daily basis. Many students on our campus are apathetic about their own spiritual lives, and few see the value of attending a local church. Thom and Sam Rainer have conducted research on this segment of the American population and have discovered that students who were regularly involved in church during their high school years drop out of church altogether at a rate of 70 percent between the ages of 18-22.\(^{21}\) If churches do not discover ways to attract and assimilate this generation, these churches will eventually die. The need for revitalization is obvious.

For more than ten years now, God has created in me a burden for unhealthy churches that are scattered across America. While these churches are unhealthy today, I believe many of them can be revitalized and can once again be influential forces for the kingdom of God.

**Rationale**

This research is beneficial in two regards. First, it assists church leaders in revitalizing unhealthy churches in America. This objective is accomplished by offering guidelines for working with churches based on Paul’s ministry. Second, this research helps fill a void that currently exists in church consulting literature.

**Survey of Church Health Concerns**

One reason revitalizing churches in America is necessary is because a strategy which focuses on church planting alone often ignores potential contributions of existing churches. Some denominations have responded to the disturbing news on church health by turning to church planting as the strategy to fulfill the Great Commission. The Presbyterian Church in America, for example, established its MNA (Mission to North America) several years ago to, “serve PCA churches and presbyteries as they advance God’s kingdom in North America by planting, growing, and multiplying biblically healthy churches.” United Methodists also declared a need for new church starts. In particular, the United Methodist Church stated in 2008 that they want “to start 650 new congregations with 63,000 members by 2012 as part of a new emphasis on church growth in the United States."

Southern Baptists may be one of the most aggressive denominations in church planting efforts. On September 15, 2010, the newly elected president of the North American Mission Board, Kevin Ezell, addressed his staff to emphasize the importance of church planting. In his address, Ezell declared,

"Today, we’ve got the potential of entering a golden age of church planting. The GCR (Great Commission Resurgence) and Southern Baptists made it very clear that they want us to be about church planting. Fifty percent of NAMB’s budget is to be for church planting. So we need to be building the greatest church planting network"


23Linda Green, “United Methodist plan emphasizes new church starts” (Nashville: 2007) [on-line]; accessed 8 April 2011, available from http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=L4KnN1Lth&b=2072525&ct=3999417; Internet. Tim Ghianni provided updates on this church planting initiative in 2010 in his article, “Path 1 Begins Training Church-plant Coaches,” published in the UM Portal. In the article, Tom Butcher reiterated, “By the end of 2012, our goal is to have 650 new congregations.” While no update was given on the progress made thus far, at another point in the article, Butcher added, “This is the first time the denomination has put a national emphasis on church planting in over 100 years. We used to have the habit as United Methodists or the Methodist Church in the 1800s of planting a church a day. Ultimately we hope to get back to that—and even more.” Ghianni’s article is available from http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=6387; 11 April 2011; Internet.
in the world. God has given us the resources. We will have the passion. But we must focus and get it done. We can be the greatest church planting network the world has ever seen – to God’s glory, not our own.  

While these church planting efforts are necessary and helpful, the evangelical community would be mistaken to ignore the potential contributions of existing churches. Stetzer underscores the need for a combination of church health and church planting by saying, “We need a strategy to revitalize established churches and, at the same time, to plant thousands of new churches.” The physical resources, human resources, and financial resources in American churches offer tremendous potential to positively impact the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In order for these churches to achieve their full potential, however, the health of these congregations must improve.

Furthermore, church planting alone is more of a short-term solution to the diminishing evangelical influence in America. For example, David Meacham, former senior strategist for church planting with the North American Mission Board, has argued that new churches simply reach more people for Christ than long-established churches. Meacham also acknowledges, however, that “A three year old church is only half as effective in reaching people for the Lord as it was in its early days. . . . And once a church is 15 years old, it becomes only one-third as effective.”

If these statistics remain true, church planting does not provide the only
solution to the lack of church growth in America today. New churches can be planted, but the research suggests that in a short period of time the majority of new church starts will be plateaued or declining like other churches scattered across the American landscape. For this reason, an emphasis on both church planting and revitalizing church health is needed.

Revitalizing churches requires leaders to analyze their means to evaluate “success” in the church. In their book, Transformational Church, Stetzer and Rainer express concern over the way success is often evaluated in churches today:

The issue of measuring success in the church has become an issue of debate in recent years. . . . The old scorecard of the church valued the external measures of the three Bs: bodies, budget, and buildings. The North American culture likes to count and so does its church. So we count the number of people attending, the number of dollars being used, and the number of square feet being inhabited for the purpose of the church. ²⁸

As American churches have embraced a method of evaluating success on the wrong criteria, they have developed a wrong understanding of church health. The apostle Paul’s ministry—a ministry that offers biblical directions to properly evaluate and address the health of a church—can therefore speak to American churches.

Survey of Church Consulting Literature

A survey of church consulting literature reveals at least one significant void. Church consulting authors often assume rather than articulate a biblical foundation for their work. This dissertation, which studies Paul’s work with churches via his letters in the New Testament, seeks to address this void.

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Literature on church health and church consulting often lacks an expressed biblical foundation. Elmer Towns, a long-term leader in the Church Growth Movement, has recognized the historical tendency of the Church Growth Movement to rely too heavily on sociological research. His concerns are fourfold:

First, it is possible for some researchers to examine by social research and reject a principle of Church Growth that may be explicitly taught in Scripture. This happens when a correct principle is wrongly applied in a local church. Second, it is possible to examine and identify by social research a principle of Church Growth that is causing church growth, and yet that principle may not be Biblical—and may even be anti-Biblical—in its expression. Third, it is possible to accept or reject a Biblical Church Growth principle because one’s sociological data are faulty or incomplete. Fourth, it is possible to accept or reject a Church Growth principle based on sociological observation alone (growth statistics), while the church that is growing in numbers does not meet the criteria of the NT in doctrine or practice.29

Towns does not dismiss, however, the value of social research. In fact, social research has proven to be beneficial in scientifically analyzing effective churches and the strategies they implement. Unfortunately, no one has developed church consultation or revitalization literature to date that complements the contributions of sociology with a strong theological study of church health.

The most thorough church consulting book today is Lyle Schaller’s book *The Interventionist*.30 Throughout the book, Schaller offers practical insights about the role and function of the consultant. Noticeably absent, however, is biblical support that may guide churches in revitalization. The proposal here is to develop a biblical and theological understanding of church health by examining Paul’s ministry via his letters and extracting principles leading to the revitalization so desperately needed in American

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Books on the topic of church revitalization are scarce. Harry Reeder’s book, *From Embers to a Flame*, however, is a strong resource that proposes a revitalization strategy. Reeder establishes a biblical foundation in his work by analyzing Paul’s letters to Timothy, the book of Ephesians, and the address to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2. Reeder’s threefold revitalization strategy encourages the reader to remember the past, repent from sin, and recover the first things. While Reeder’s work is similar to the proposal here, this dissertation studies Paul’s ministry to a number of New Testament churches, rather than the region of Ephesus alone. Reeder’s work is also different in that he uses his own church, Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, as a case study for readers. This dissertation will complement rather than duplicate the work Reeder has done.

An examination of previous scholarship also reveals that some have gone as far as to argue that Paul was a church consultant, at least in function, but no one has written an analysis of Paul’s interest in revitalizing New Testament churches. In 2006, Warner Smith wrote his dissertation on the topic of church consulting in the North American church from 1960-2003. His approach, however, focused more on trends in consulting, the use of sociological research, and modern methodologies in the field. In the early segments of his work, Smith argues for a biblical precedent for the field of consulting today by examining Paul and his work with many New Testament churches.

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He does not, however, elaborate on Paul’s ministry with these churches.

In addition to Smith, Robert Bardeen wrote his Doctor of Ministry project to provide a historical, practical, biblical, and secular understanding for the work of consulting with churches today.  His research produced one full chapter in which he made a case for Paul as the first church consultant. Again, however, Bardeen did not thoroughly study Paul’s ministry of revitalization and his interest in church health among New Testament churches.

To put it simply, Smith and Bardeen argue that a biblical precedent for church consulting does exist, however, they then turn their attention to contemporary approaches to identify best practices in consulting today. The approach in this work instead focuses on the Apostle Paul, not as a prototype church consultant, but as one who was concerned about church revitalization and best understood factors to be addressed in order for churches to be healthy and effective.

Definitions and Delimitations

In a world where language can be ambiguous, it is important to define key terms and declare one’s presuppositions. In this research, it is beneficial to provide clarity on terms such as revitalization, church consultation, church consultant, Pauline literature, church, church growth, and church health.

Given the title of this dissertation, it is necessary to begin by defining the term “revitalization.” Harry Reeder has defined revitalization as the process “of leading a

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church that has plateaued of [sic] declined or lost effectiveness for the work of the
kingdom back to vitality and effectiveness in serving Christ.”34 While Reeder believes
that healthy churches will experience growth in conversions, members, giving and
missionaries, he insists that “the objective is NOT church growth but church health. . . .
When growth becomes the objective it is only a matter of time until pragmatism guides
the decision making process of the leadership.”35

Thom Rainer has defined church consultation as, “the process where a person
or persons provide insights and recommendations to improve the overall health of a
church, or to provide [expertise] in a specific area of church need.”36 A church
consultation then is led by a church consultant. Will Mancini has defined a church
consultant as, “a strategic outsider tasked with diagnosing and making recommendations
for church clients.”37 Mancini further assumes that a church consultant is someone who
works with at least two churches per year and has received training as a consultant or has
extensive experience as a pastor.38 In this dissertation, the words “consultant” and
“revitalization agent” are used interchangeably.

In some ways, Paul functioned similarly to a church consultant today. First,

34 Eric Landry and Harry Reeder, “Revitalization” (October 2009) [on-line]; accessed 14 April

35 Ibid.

36 This definition is found in training material used by Thom Rainer and Chuck Lawless. The
material was printed by Church Central, a firm based in Louisville, Kentucky, that trains prospective
consultants.

FT_Executive_Summary.pdf; Internet.

38 Ibid.
individuals who were concerned about their church contacted Paul. For example, Paul received reports from the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:11, 7:1, 16:17). Second, Paul provided a written response in which he articulated problems and made recommendations for improving church health. Many of his letters address these issues in various churches. Third, Paul offered guidance to churches even though he did not serve as their pastor. His role was unique, however, as noted below.

It is also imperative to acknowledge key points at which Paul differs from consultants today. First, the New Testament letters which Paul wrote were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16). Second, Paul held the office of apostle, a position of uniqueness and authority (1 Cor 15:9). Third, Paul planted most of the churches that he later advised. Fourth, Paul did not have the consultant training that the chosen definition of a church consultant requires.

Each of these facts leads to making two necessary distinctions. First, Paul wrote to churches with a unique sense of authority, a reality which consultants cannot duplicate today. Second, Paul had a unique relationship with the churches he advised—a preexisting relationship that must be noted when considering how Paul’s ministry might inform a consultation/revitalization ministry today. Each of these differences is more fully developed in this dissertation, but these differences do not preclude discovering insights in Paul’s ministry to help church leaders and consultants work toward church health.39

39For example, Paul loved the churches to whom he wrote. Church leaders today who are working in the area of church revitalization should love the church also. Learning to love a church one did not plant, though, may be more challenging. Paul’s love for the church will be addressed throughout this dissertation, particularly in chapter 4.
Considering this research is an attempt to analyze Paul’s letters, defining *Pauline literature* is in order. At the onset, it should be recognized that respected scholars differ on what they believe is authentically Pauline. Letters of dispute include Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastorals.\(^{40}\) Throughout this research, however, *Pauline literature* refers to the following thirteen books: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. This view is affirmed by a number of scholars and is sufficient for this study.\(^{41}\)

Another term to define in this research is the term *church*. Throughout this dissertation the term “church” will be used to describe a “local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to his teachings, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.”\(^{42}\) This definition affirms my presupposition that the church is a group of people whose faith is centered upon the person of Jesus Christ. This distinction matters because it alleviates the possibility of confusing the church, as defined here, with religious groups in general or other world faiths in particular.

Another term to define in this research is *church growth*. Historically, this


term has been at the center of controversy, debate, and confusion. Thom Rainer has defined *church growth* as “that discipline which seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological, historical, and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline.” This discipline finds its foundational work in the work of Donald McGavran.

A similar, but somewhat difficult term to define, is *church health*. Most authors describe church health rather than define it. In his book *Discipled Warriors*, Chuck Lawless has developed a model of the church that he believes, “offers direction for the congregation that desires to be a healthy church.” Using Lawless’ model, one could conclude that a healthy church is a church that is built on a solid biblical and theological foundation and seeks to be obedient to the Great Commission and the Great Commandments by exalting God in worship, evangelizing the world through proclamation and missions, equipping believers through teaching and mentoring, edifying others through ministry and service, encountering God through prayer, and encouraging one another through fellowship.

It should be clear then, that improving church health is not intended to merely increase bodies, budgets, and buildings. Instead, improving church health is understood

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44 Ibid.

45Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 128-29. Rather than defining church health, Warren describes a healthy church as one which achieves balance. Specifically, he writes, “Imbalance is illness. Likewise, balancing the five New Testament purposes brings health to the body of Christ, the church.” Stephen Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), also elects to describe a healthy church, rather than define it. Specifically, he identifies ten traits which are common among healthy churches, but does note that he does not provide an exhaustive list.

46Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 23.

47Ibid. Lawless’ book describes each of these purposes of the church.
in this study as promoting obedience to the Great Commandment and increasing effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission. As obedience and effectiveness are achieved in these areas, the church should, in most cases, experience church health and growth.\(^{48}\)

In regard to the delimitations of this research, this study is concerned only with churches in America. While Pauline literature is applicable to churches in any place, at any time in history, the field of church consulting is, for the most part, utilized only in the American context. For this reason, this dissertation focuses on the health of the American church and the contributions consultants can make in revitalizing those churches.

**Conclusion**

The intent of this research is not simply to study Pauline literature, but to extract practical insights from the biblical text that can lead to needed change in the American church. In the New Testament, churches reported to Paul on the health of their church. The reporting structure found in Paul’s letters reveals a partnership whereby churches were held accountable to Paul in the pursuit of church health (2 Cor 13:1-2; Gal 1:6-7; 3:1).

Throughout his ministry, Paul worked with existing churches to address contextual factors, institutional factors, and spiritual factors that affected the health of the church. Those same factors affect church health today. This study, therefore, addresses

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\(^{48}\)Numerous variables are part of the equation in determining if a church is healthy or unhealthy. One cannot invariably conclude that growing churches are also healthy. The opposite is also true. One cannot invariably conclude that churches which are plateaued or in decline are unhealthy. In both cases, churches should be examined beyond simple growth trends to determine health.
these factors while examining the ministry of the apostle Paul as a church health expert. It is my hope that church leaders will recognize their need for someone like Paul, embrace the possibility of utilizing a consultant, and lead their churches to revitalization.
CHAPTER 2
A PAULINE PERSPECTIVE ON REVITALIZATION MINISTRY

Introduction

With the American church in a state of crisis as noted in the previous chapter, Christian leaders are left questioning what should be done to improve church health. Church leaders today are often showered with recommendations as to what their church should be and how they should minister in order to be effective in the twenty-first century. Daniel Akin has noted that some argue,

We must be seeker sensitive and purpose driven. There are others who call us to be relevant, positive, and even attractive. Some challenge us to return to the ancients both in form and practice. Others call us to doctrinal purity grounded in Reformational theology. And still others call us to community and authenticity, to intimacy and family. They tell us we need to focus on mystery and wonder or perhaps social action or our personal freedom in Christ.\(^1\)

While suggestions about what the church should be abound, many fail to zero in on what the church must be in order to be a healthy New Testament church. Church leaders need not resort to a system of trial and error or pursue the latest fad in an attempt to lead their church to health. Instead, they should turn to the biblical text, which readily speaks to ecclesiological matters and offers insights on church health.

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The apostle Paul serves as an exemplary New Testament model for those who are interested in church health today. As noted earlier, Paul’s unique apostolic ministry is not reproducible, but his interaction with local churches nevertheless provides direction for church revitalization agents. His letters offer a number of insights that can be useful to those who long to see churches revitalized today.

Additionally, the apostle Paul worked with different churches—some that were generally healthy, and others that were unhealthy. His ministry to healthy churches serves as a model demonstrating a proactive approach to maintaining church health, while his ministry to unhealthy churches serves as a model illustrating a reactive approach to improving church health. Paul’s overall work as a revitalization agent will be the focus of this chapter.

**Unique Characteristics of Paul’s Ministry**

Revitalization agents today can learn much by studying the roles Paul played when working with churches. In many cases, they can increase their effectiveness by imitating Paul. In other cases, however, they should understand that Paul was a unique apostle from God to the church, and no contemporary church consultant can duplicate that role. Moreover, Paul’s status as church planter/missionary sometimes afforded him opportunities that church revitalization agents seldom have today.

**Paul: The Apostle with Authority**

One unique characteristic of Paul’s ministry to churches was his apostolic calling (Acts 26:12-18). The term “apostle” was used to describe, “one chosen and sent
with a special commission as the fully authorized representative of the sender.”² While this definition could lead the reader to believe that all Christians are, at least in some way, apostles of Jesus Christ, Norval Geldenhuys elaborates on the distinct nature of this important office for the original apostles:

By calling the twelve men whom He chose out of the wider circle of disciples by the name ‘apostles’ (šeluhím) and not merely ‘messengers’ or ‘heralds,’ Jesus thus made it clear that they were to be His delegates whom He would send with the commission to teach and to act in His name and on His authority. That this was indeed what he meant is shown by the whole history of his dealings with the Twelve.³

In addition to the twelve, Paul was also appointed an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:8-10). Paul too understood the office of the apostle to be a unique office which met a pivotal need primarily in the formative years of the church. Paul’s own references to his work among the Gentiles (Rom 1:5, 15:16-19, 16:26) suggest “that he saw himself as having a major role and responsibility in God’s plan for the world.”⁴ As an apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13), Paul participated in laying the foundation for a unique segment of the church and was a likely source for churches to turn to when problems or threats emerged.

As an apostle, Paul had been entrusted with the authority of the one he was sent to represent, Jesus Christ. He exercised his apostolic authority which God had given him for the building up of the church, not for tearing down (2 Cor 13:10). Apostolic authority was a unique feature of this office that enabled the apostles to exercise a strong

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³Ibid.

sense of leadership over the churches with whom they were working. For example, Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in his role as apostle, Paul understood his right to give clear and specific direction to the Thessalonian church.

The New Testament teachings on apostleship make at least two significant points which are pertinent to this study. First, Paul’s apostleship gave him a sense of command and authority that revitalization agents today cannot imitate. Revitalization agents can pray for the church, instruct the church, and even seek to persuade the church in practices that promote church health. In the end, however, Paul had been entrusted with a unique sense of authority over churches that today’s consultants do not have. No revitalization agent today can claim that his words are the Word of God.

Second, Paul’s apostleship may help explain why churches were willing to enlist his assistance when problems or threats surfaced. As John Piper explains in describing the strategy Jesus chose to lead his church, “Jesus founded the apostolate as a band of authoritative representatives who would act and speak on his behalf in a unique role as founders of the church through an inspiration and an authority that is now preserved in their writings, which is the way the Lord continues to use their ministry to sustain and guide the church.”

Jesus appointed and equipped apostles to carry on the work of the kingdom through the church (John 16:5-16). Even though Paul’s appointment was unique compared to the original twelve apostles, his duties as an apostle remained the same. He spoke on Jesus’ behalf, and God has preserved his writings to help guide the church today toward health and effectiveness.

God had appointed Paul, among others, to this important office. The risen Lord had revealed himself to Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-31) and had called him to serve as his authorized representative. Paul’s unique calling to be an apostle and his experiences as a missionary that resulted from it likely prompted churches to enlist Paul’s assistance, and perhaps affected their willingness to listen to the recommendations he made. No consultant today, however, can claim that role.

**Paul: The Inspired Letter Writer**

When Paul sought to communicate with churches about factors affecting their overall health and effectiveness, he typically did so by writing letters. Letter writing was a common practice in the first century, and in “Paul’s day there was a long tradition for producing letters for public consumption.”

In some ways, consultation reports today share many similarities with the letters Paul wrote. Both report on diagnosed problems or potential threats to the local church. Both include instruction on how the church should deal with problems or threats which compromise their health. Both typically include conclusions and guidance to implement. While these similarities exist, at least one significant distinction must be made—Paul’s writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit (2

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6John Polhill, *Paul & His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 120.
Tim 3:16).

When Paul wrote to churches and gave them instruction on how to deal with problems or potential threats, his letters carried divine authority which revitalization agents today cannot claim. Paul was not offering suggestions or recommendations he believed the church could implement or disregard at their discretion. Instead, he frequently wrote in the imperative (2 Cor 13:2-3; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 3:4, 3:6, 3:12; 1 Tim 1:18) because his words were indeed the Word of God. Paul’s understanding of his own inspiration is revealed in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica when he commended them, saying, “When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God” (2:13).

Paul’s understanding of his own inspiration was not simply a self-assumed privilege. Peter also recognized the inspiration of Paul’s writings. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 he wrote, “as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” Commentating on this text, Piper notes, “Peter put Paul’s letters in the category with God’s inspired and authoritative scriptures.”

Revitalization agents today should care immensely about the health of the churches with whom they work. That genuine concern should lead them to pray for godly wisdom and insight as they instruct churches toward greater health. In the end,

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however, consultation reports and recommendations are only the words of man—whereas Paul’s letters are the Word of God. This distinctive feature of Paul’s writings cannot be duplicated.

**Paul: The Church Planter**

Another characteristic which distinguishes Paul from most revitalization agents today was the existing relationship he had with the churches he advised. Prior to being an advisor on matters of church health, Paul had planted many of the churches with whom he worked. The book of Acts (chapters 13-19) records Paul’s three missionary journeys. While Paul preached the good news in many cities, four cities in particular are worth noting in this dissertation because of the follow-up work he conducted as evidenced in his epistles.

First, Acts 16:9-10 records Paul’s vision of the man from Macedonia who pleaded with Paul to come and help them. Concluding that God was calling him and his companions to preach the gospel to those in Macedonia, Paul and his fellow missionaries boarded a boat and traveled to Philippi (16:11-12). Acts 16:14-15 records the conversion of Lydia and those in her household. Paul and Silas “went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them” (16:40). In his commentary on Philippians, Hendriksen claims, “It is clear from Acts 16:40 that Lydia was by no means the only convert in Philippi. Moreover, men as well as women were translated from the kingdom of darkness into that of light.”

Men and women were converted, and Paul established

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the first church in the city of Philippi.\textsuperscript{9} Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, therefore, was written to a church he had started, which included individuals he had personally led to Christ.

In addition to Paul’s church planting in Philippi, Acts 17:1-9 records Paul’s work among those in Thessalonica. In their commentary on Thessalonians, Hendriksen and Kistemaker note that,

Paul remained in Thessalonica at least three weeks. The three week figure is mentioned in Acts 17:2, but it should be noted that it probably merely indicates the duration of his teaching \textit{in the synagogue}. If it be borne in mind that a church of considerable size was established here (implied in 1 Thess 5:12), that many of the citizens of Thessalonica turned from the worship of idols to serve the living God (1 Thess 1:9), that this spiritual awakening was so far-reaching that its report spread in every direction, and especially that during the `campaign` in this city Paul twice received a bounty from the church at Philippi (Phil 4:16), the conclusion lies ready at hand that the total period of time which the missionaries spent in founding the new church was somewhat longer than three weeks.\textsuperscript{10}

It is thus reasonable to conclude that Paul spent in excess of three weeks working among those in Thessalonica, though how much longer cannot be known. The fact that Paul remained in Thessalonica long enough to receive two gifts from the church in Philippi indicates that his stay in Thessalonica may have been considerably longer than three weeks. Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians, therefore, was strengthened not only by the fact that he was a church planter in their city, but also because of the time he spent with these believers.

\textsuperscript{9}G. F. Hawthorne, “Philippians, Letter to,” in \textit{Dictionary of Paul and His Letters}, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 708. Hawthorne claims that the church Paul planted in Philippi was not only the first church in that city, but was most likely the first Christian church on European soil.

Paul’s relationship with the believers in Corinth and Ephesus was also strengthened by the amount of interaction he had with them. Acts 18:11 reveals that Paul worked in Corinth “for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God,” that is, longer than any city except Ephesus. When writing to the Corinthians, Paul expressed the feelings he developed for them: “I always thank my God concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you in Christ Jesus” (1:4). Paul’s greeting and his conclusion (1 Cor 16:24) signify the emotions he felt for this church. Time with them helped Paul see that God had blessed the Corinthians with speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4-7).

The amount of time Paul spent in Ephesus was considerably lengthy compared to the amount of time he spent in other cities. Acts 19:9-10 indicates that Paul led daily discussions in the Ephesian lecture hall for two years. In all, Paul spent “(three months of teaching in the local synagogue and two years in the lecture hall), the entire course of study lasting nearly three years” (20:31).11 The time Paul spent in Ephesus served to establish a relationship prior to writing his letter of instruction to guide the believers in the area of Ephesus in matters of church health.

In addition to relationship building, Paul also used his extended stay in Ephesus to prepare the believers there for Christian ministry. For example, shortly after arriving in Ephesus Paul encountered twelve men also inadequately instructed in Christian teaching (Acts 19:1-7) and who had not received the Holy Spirit. . . . The men claimed only to be familiar with the teaching of John the Baptist and had received his baptism. Paul baptized them, presumably after instructing them more fully about Jesus. After Paul laid his hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit, prophesied and spoke in

tongues. . . Paul took these new believers with him and spoke daily in the lecture hall in the city (*schole Tyrannou*, Acts 19:9).  

Thus, Paul’s devotion to equipping “the saints for the work of service” (Eph 4:12) was an important part of his ministry in Ephesus, as well as an important part of the letter he later penned to the church.

It is important to note again the significance of relationships in Paul’s ministry. The fact that Paul had served as the church planter of some of the churches he advised undoubtedly affected his work. Additionally, Paul spent considerable amounts of time establishing relationships with the churches he advised, which likely enhanced his opportunities to speak forthrightly and increased the churches’ willingness to hear his instruction.

Revitalization agents today would be wise to recognize this unique characteristic of Paul’s ministry and seek to understand the liberties Paul enjoyed as a result. While revitalization agents today cannot imitate Paul’s role as church planter, they can be involved in relational ministry. By spending time with the church, as Paul was in the habit of doing, revitalization agents can build greater degrees of trust, become more informed about the church, and develop stronger ties with the congregation. Even a brief amount of time—a weekend, for example—can strengthen a consultant’s credibility.

**Paul:**  
**The Uniquely Trained Gospel Minister**

Another unique aspect of Paul’s revitalization ministry was the manner in which he had been trained for the gospel ministry. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul

responded to his critics by detailing unique qualifications which distinguished him from others: “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless” (3:4-6). Within his Jewish pedigree, “Paul studied the law, became ‘faultless’ in keeping it and passionate in his endeavor to protect it from any would-be enemies. . . . Paul ‘advanced in Judaism’ beyond his fellow students in his knowledge and zeal for the law.”

Additionally, Paul’s training afforded him the opportunity to study under the venerated Jewish teacher, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Polhill elaborates on this distinct privilege which Paul enjoyed, saying,

Gamaliel was the outstanding teacher of the law in Paul’s day. . . . Gamaliel conducted his school from A.D. 22 to 55. He was the outstanding teacher of his generation and was greatly revered in the tradition. The Mishnah says of him: ‘When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the law ceased and purity and abstinence died’ (Sotah 9.15). The fact that Paul was a pupil of Gamaliel was not only a privilege, but also an experience which provided him with exceptional training. This training better prepared Paul for his gospel ministry and may have contributed to his ability to advise churches comprised primarily of Jews.

For example, as one who had been entrenched in Jewish training, Paul was quick to recognize the danger of falling back into Judaism. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul warned the church not to abandon their new faith in Christ crucified for a gospel of

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13Polhill, Paul and His Letters, 27.

14Ibid., 30, italics in original.
works according to the Law (3:1-14). In making his case, Paul relied heavily on the Old Testament and his understanding of the Jewish patriarch Abraham as he reminded the Galatians that Jesus was indeed the long awaited Messiah promised to the Jews (3:6-14). Paul’s argument was powerful because his training equipped him to understand his audience, their way of thinking, and their tendency to rely on the Law (3:10). His ability to argue from the Jewish Scriptures further enhanced the power of his argument, a skill he also acquired from his training in Judaism.

A final characteristic of Paul’s preparation which must not be missed is his calling. C. G. Kruse notes six distinct aspects of Paul’s calling:

1. He had been chosen by God for this task even before he was born (as had been some of the prophets of the OT, cf. Is 49:1, 5; Jer 1:5; see Prophet, Paul As). (2) His own realization of this calling came to him by a revelation from God at a time determined by God himself. (3) It had nothing to do with anything deserving on Paul’s part; it came through God’s grace. (4) It involved a revelation by God of his Son Jesus Christ to Paul so that he might preach Christ to others. (5) The preaching ministry to which he was called had a specific scope: to the Gentiles. (6) It came directly from God, without human mediation. 

Paul’s incident on the Damascus road was unusual, and his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles was an experience that distinguished him from any other apostle. Jesus had a specific ministry for Paul. Consequently, he healed Paul of his spiritual and physical blindness so he could fulfill his calling by starting and sustaining healthy churches among the Gentiles.

Clearly, Paul’s unique preparation made him different from church revitalization agents today. That is not to say, however, that Paul cannot serve as an excellent model for revitalizers, as the next section shows.

\[15 \text{C. G. Kruse, “Calling,” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 85, italics in original.}\]
Reproducible Characteristics of Paul’s Ministry

Even though many aspects of Paul’s ministry are unique and simply cannot be reproduced, one must resist concluding that Paul is not a good model for those working to improve church health. In fact, revitalization agents today often reproduce aspects of Paul’s work with churches, whether intentionally or unintentionally. These reproducible characteristics should be underscored in an attempt to establish a biblical foundation for the work of revitalization ministry today.

Paul the Trusted Expert:
Respected Advisor for Churches

An analysis of Paul’s ministry reveals a pattern of individuals turning to Paul for his expertise and guidance out of concern for the health of the church. Two examples of this pattern in Paul’s ministry are found in 1 Corinthians. Early in his letter to the church Paul stated, “For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you” (1:11). Later in the letter, Paul referenced another report he had received, saying, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife” (5:1).

Paul responded forthrightly to the news he received by naming his informant in 1:11 (Chloe’s people) “and so indicates that he has not heard rumors but has received

16S. J. Hafemann, “Corinthians, Letters to the,” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 164. Hafemann has argued that 1 Corinthians 1:10-6:20 “contains Paul’s responses to the issues which he has heard about from ‘Chloe’s people.’” While Hafemann is careful to note that Paul is indeed responding to reports he has received regarding the health of the church in Corinth, he does not speak to the motive behind the reports. Since Paul does not speak to the motive of those from Chloe’s household, one can only hope that these reports were shared by individuals who were genuinely concerned about the health of this church.
facts. He is told by people who are not sent as messengers by the church in Corinth, but who come to him on their own accord. Obviously the church has not taken the initiative to inform Paul about its quarrels.\textsuperscript{17} This example demonstrates the value of turning to trusted and respected advisors out of concern for the health of a church.\textsuperscript{18} Without this report, the sin may have continued and the effectiveness of the church would have been hindered.

The situation in Corinth was extreme. This church was involved in quarreling (1:11), committing acts of sexual immorality not practiced even among the Gentiles (1 Cor 5:1), and filing lawsuits between believers (6:1-6). The church leaders were failing in their responsibility to address numerous issues which hindered the health of the church. As the health of the church continued to deteriorate, those from Chloe’s household consulted with Paul, who “had become the Corinthians’ spiritual father in Christ” (4:15).\textsuperscript{19} Paul, therefore, was a likely person to turn to in times of trouble because of his involvement in establishing the church, his apostolic authority, and his love for the congregation.

\textsuperscript{17}Simon Kistemaker, \textit{1 Corinthians}, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker 2004), 46.

\textsuperscript{18}George Guthrie, \textit{Hebrews}, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 442. A word of caution, however, is in order at this point. The Bible offers multiple reminders that God has appointed leaders to their positions of authority (Acts 20:28, Rom 13:1-2, Heb 13:17, 1 Pet 2:13-17). Church leaders are in the positions they hold because God has appointed them to their position through the governing bodies of the local church. Guthrie makes the point that, “When members of the church fail to submit themselves to the leadership, the leaders end up working under an emotional burden that gives them a life filled with sighs. Such a condition is ‘of no advantage’ to the congregation since ministry is diminished by undue emotional stress.” Consequently, members of churches should not ask outside experts to intervene without pastoral agreement. Likewise, those involved in revitalization ministries today should refrain from consulting with churches whose pastoral leadership has not requested their assistance.

\textsuperscript{19}Kistemaker, \textit{1 Corinthians}, 46.
Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth also suggests that he was prompted to intervene because of reports he had received from individuals. In this case, his informant was Titus. In 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, Paul wrote, “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us, your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.” Paul, who was no doubt downtrodden because of the crisis in Corinth, was comforted by the report Titus provided. Titus’ report entailed the church’s longing for Paul, their sorrow over what had happened, and their desire to rectify the wrong they had done.20 While the work of church revitalization can at times be discouraging, it also has the potential to be rewarding and even cause rejoicing, just as it did for Paul.

Later, Paul described Titus as one of the “messengers of the churches” (2 Cor 8:23) whom Paul used to both send and receive messages:

[Titus] was entrusted with the delicate task of delivering Paul’s ‘severe letter’ (2 Cor 2:1-4) to Corinth and correcting problems within the church there (2 Cor 7:13-15). Titus’ genuine concern for and evenhanded dealings with the Corinthians (2 Cor 8:16-17; 12:18) no doubt contributed to his success which he reported in person to Paul, anxiously awaiting word in Macedonia (2 Cor 2:13; 7:5-6, 13-15).21

Paul responded to Titus’ report by writing 2 Corinthians, which Titus also probably delivered (2 Cor 8:16-18, 23).

In addition to the reports Paul received from the Corinthians, other New Testament evidence shows that Paul commonly received reports regarding the churches


he planted. For example, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13 speaks of Timothy’s visit to the church in Thessalonica and highlights aspects of the report Paul had received from Timothy. In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians, Robert Thomas describes Timothy’s report, saying,

Rather than using a neutral verb in speaking of Timothy’s report (cf. *apangellousin*, “they relate,” 1:9), Paul chooses the verb usually reserved for preaching the gospel (*euangelismenou*, “bringing good news”). . . . The report was both spiritual and personal. Spiritually, they had progressed in both faith and love; their trust in God had been sufficient for their difficulties. Yet room for improvement remained (cf. v.10). Likewise their progress in loving others was uplifting news, though even here there was also room for growth (cf. 3:12; 4:9,10). . . Timothy’s report of the kindly feelings of the Thessalonians toward him (“pleasant memories,” “long to see us”) assured Paul that they had not written him off as an exploiter, disinterested in their welfare.22

Although the evidence is not as strong, Epaphroditus may have also been an individual who reported to Paul about the health of a church. Specifically, Epaphroditus worked among the church at Philippi. Additionally, we know that Epaphroditus was called an ‘envoy’ of the Philippians (ὑμίν . . ἀπόστολος). Although this term of respect frequently described those who had been commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus as his authoritative representatives (including Paul himself: Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 9:1, 2; 2 Cor 1:1; and esp. Gal 1:15-17), ἀπόστολος was also used of ‘the messengers of the churches’ (2 Cor 8:23), that is, those envoys commissioned by the congregations for specific purposes.23

The title “envoy” suggests that Epaphroditus was involved in conveying messages between Paul and the church in Philippi. It is likely that Epaphroditus brought not only a gift of financial support to Paul (4:18), but also gave a report about the church which prompted Paul to write a letter to them.

The examples of those from Chloe’s household, Timothy, Titus, and


Epaphroditus all create a composite New Testament image of individuals working with Paul to strengthen churches. The evidence, however, does not end with these individuals. In his commentary on Ephesians, A. Skevington Wood paints a much broader image that reveals just how frequently Paul communicated with church representatives on matters pertaining to the health of the church. Specifically, he claims,

While Paul was under house detention in Rome, he enjoyed certain privileges in what was a relaxed form of custody. Among these was the freedom to receive a constant stream of visitors. No doubt the Christians in Rome availed themselves of the opportunity. We know that representatives of the Jewish community also came to inquire about the ostracized Christian sect (Acts 28:22, 23). Intimate friends like Luke, Aristarchus, and presumably Timothy were often at Paul’s side. From time to time he would also receive messengers from the churches beyond Rome. One of these was Epaphras, whom Paul addressed as his companion in the service of Christ and in his captivity (Col 1:7; 4:12; Philm 23). It seems that it was he who was instrumental in evangelizing the Lycus Valley region at Paul’s instigation during the Ephesian mission and who founded the churches in Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. Epaphras came to Rome to bring Paul a progress report about these congregations.  

This brief study of Paul’s working relationship with New Testament churches yields at least two insights. First, there were cases when individuals sought Paul’s assistance out of concern for the health of their church. Church leaders, in particular, should learn from these biblical examples and humbly seek assistance when their church is unhealthy in certain areas.

Second, this study reveals that Paul utilized messengers to gather information about the health of the churches he had planted. In the cases of Timothy, Titus, and Epaphroditus, it is unclear if these men were commissioned by the churches or if they were fellow workers Paul used to inquire about the health of the churches he planted.

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Regardless of the situation, a precedent exists for having respected advisors watch over the health of church plants, at least during their formative years. Paul had invested financial and human resources into these churches, and he wanted to see that investment bear fruit. Likewise, those involved in church planting efforts today should consider guarding their investment of kingdom resources by watching over the health of the churches they plant.

**Paul the Effective Communicator:**
**Communication through Various Channels**

Another useful characteristic of Paul’s ministry which revitalization agents today may emulate was his communication style. In his book, *Persuasion*, Charles Larson notes that effective communicators select the most appropriate channel to convey messages to their audience. While Paul did not have at his disposal the number of communication channels available in our technologically advanced world today, he did utilize a variety of techniques to communicate with his churches. The primary channels Paul used when counseling churches were letters, emissaries, and personal visits.

One of the more common ways Paul communicated with churches was by writing letters. Paul wrote a total of thirteen books in the New Testament, each of which is in letter form. Paul often used this channel of communication “as a substitute for his personal presence.” This approach was especially helpful to Paul, who was often

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27 Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*, 120.
28 Ibid., 121.
hindered from visiting the churches he loved because of his schedule or even imprisonment (Acts 16:23-40; 2 Cor 6:5; 11:23; 2 Tim 2:9). Rather than relying only on messengers who may forget critical aspects of his message or communicate in a tone that is inconsistent with his own, Paul utilized letters to convey detailed messages with specific instruction.

Paul’s letter writing ministry also facilitated sharing his message with a wider audience. As Polhill has noted in his book, *Paul and His Letters*,

> Though intended for specific congregations, Paul’s letters always had an eye on the larger Christian community. Thus, he addressed his first letter to Corinth to both the church at Corinth and to ‘all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor 1:2). As an apostle of Christ Jesus, Paul’s words to the specific needs at Corinth would be applicable in similar circumstances to Christians anywhere. Even Philemon, which is the most ‘private’ of all Paul’s letters, was addressed not just to the slave owner but to the whole church that met in his home (v. 2). In short, Paul’s letters were both ‘occasional’ (written for specific congregations) and general (carrying the apostle’s authority for all who might read them).  

Paul’s choice to communicate with churches via letters made it possible for his message to be shared not only throughout the Christian community in his own day, but also in the church today.

Revitalization agents today can imitate Paul’s writing ministry by providing churches with recommendations in a written summary. Such an approach provides the church with a record that can be used as they seek to implement changes for years to come. This approach also provides access to the revitalization expert’s thoughts even when he is not personally available for immediate or direct consult.

Another important channel of communication Paul utilized was emissaries.

29Ibid., italics in original.
The previous research on Timothy, Titus, and possibly even Epaphroditus revealed that these men served as emissaries, or messengers, to send and receive messages between Paul and the churches with whom he was working (2 Cor 8:23). The extensive number of co-workers Paul used in his work with churches suggests that Paul employed a team approach to effectively communicate with churches. Like Paul’s letters, other representatives were commonly used as a substitute when Paul’s personal presence was not possible.

Like Paul, revitalization agents today may use a team approach in their work with churches. In addition to using emissaries when the lead consultant is unavailable, this approach can actually enhance communication effectiveness. For example, churches struggling financially may receive a visit from a financial expert who can assist in addressing the financial health of the congregation. Likewise, emissaries can assist revitalization agents today by offering expertise in areas such as demographic studies, facility analysis, worship analysis, staffing, or any other issue where the church may need assistance.

The final way Paul communicated with churches was personal visits. For example, New Testament evidence suggests that Paul made multiple trips to visit the church in Corinth (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1). This troubled congregation had received multiple letters from Paul and visits from Paul’s emissary, Titus (2 Cor 7:12-16), yet the church remained unhealthy. Eventually, Paul made preparations to visit the congregation for a

\[30^\text{Scott Hafemann, 2 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 359-63. Hafemann shows in his commentary on 2 Cor 8:16-24 that Paul dispatched three messengers to travel to Corinth for the purpose of collecting funds for the Jerusalem church. Additionally, Kistemaker claims, “The list of Paul’s co-workers is quite extensive,” and notes that seven representatives accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. For more information on Kistemaker’s discussion regarding the sending of representatives, see Kistemaker, 2 Corinthians, 297.}\]
third time. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, Garland reveals Paul’s willingness to make numerous trips in order to rectify the situation at Corinth when he writes,

Paul warns the Corinthians that on his next visit he will be putting them on trial. ‘This will be my third visit to you’ translates ‘the third time I am coming to you’ (see 12:14). To make it fit certain chronological theories, some have tried to interpret this phrase to mean the third time I have planned to come to you. But the plain sense of the text is that Paul’s next visit to Corinth will be his third, and his reference in the next verse to when he was with them a second time confirms this reading.31

Revitalization agents today should always consider the value of imitating this aspect of Paul’s revitalization ministry. In an electronic age, it would be all too easy for revitalization agents to rely on emailed reports, scanned blueprints of the facilities and parking, demographic studies, online videos of worship services, and Skype or teleconference calls with lay people and church leaders. While these tools can assist in the collection and distribution of data, they will not yield the complete picture necessary to make credible recommendations. Technology cannot capture the smile and handshake of a greeter at the door, the friendliness of a congregation, the smell of a facility, cleanliness of the restrooms, distractions in worship, and especially the Spirit of God. For these reasons and more, revitalization agents should strive to make personal visits to the churches with whom they work.

**Paul the External Advisor:**
**Leadership from a Non-Staff Member**

This research has acknowledged that Paul fulfilled a unique role in church history. In his work with churches, Paul uniquely exercised apostolic authority; his

31 Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 539, italics in original.
writings were divinely inspired, and in most cases he had even served as the church
planter of the churches he later advised. At the same time, Paul appointed elders in every
church (Acts 14:23) so that he could move on to preach Christ where he was not known.
In his commentary on Acts, Polhill describes this action in a way that reveals Paul’s
overall desire to protect the health of the local church:

In each congregation they [Paul and Barnabas] performed three essential
ministries. First, they strengthened the disciples (v. 22a). This probably refers to
their further instructing the Christians in their new faith. Second, they encouraged
them ‘to remain true to the faith’ and pointed out the ‘many hardships’ they might
encounter for bearing the name of Jesus (v. 22b) . . . The final ministry of the
apostles was to establish leadership in the new congregations.32

Each of these actions was an attempt to proactively preserve the health of these
congregations. Once leadership was appointed, Paul did not leave these churches
unattended. Instead, he continued to work with these congregations in an advisory role,
offering his expertise whenever it might be of assistance.

Church leaders today should not carry the burden of establishing and
maintaining healthy churches on their own. Instead, they should assess the value of
utilizing revitalization agents to assist them in this important task. Sadly, some church
leaders today are reluctant to utilize the services of someone not on staff.33 This
unfortunate reality may hinder churches from maximizing their potential for the kingdom
of God.

Holman, 2002), 319.

33Will Mancini, The 2010 Church Consulting Future Trends Report (Church Central, 2009)
on-line]; accessed July 2011, available from http://www.willmancini.com/wp-
content/uploads/2011/01/FT_Executive_Summary.pdf; Internet. Mancini found that 49 percent of pastors
have not worked with an outside consultant.
A Proactive Approach to Church Health

No church is perfect, although some churches are healthier than others. A careful study of Pauline literature reveals that Paul’s writings to the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Rome, and Colosse offer little in the form of critique. Instead of critique, or even rebuke, Paul admonished these churches and encouraged them to continue in their work for the Lord. At times, however, he did warn them of dangers which might have threatened their effectiveness. This approach was a proactive measure to keep these churches on a successful course.  

Philippi

Paul received a report about the church in Philippi from his friend in the faith, Epaphroditus. The church had dispatched Epaphroditus to Paul with at least two main objectives in mind. First, he was to deliver a gift of support to Paul (4:18). Second, he was to minister to Paul’s needs (2:25). With these responsibilities fulfilled, Epaphroditus returned to Philippi with a letter from Paul, a letter which addressed at least four major issues.

First, Paul thanked the church for their gift (4:18; cf. 1:5; 2:25; 4:10, 14). Second, Paul commended Epaphroditus to the church and encouraged them to receive him as one who had faithfully completed his task (2:25-30). Third, Paul warned the ____________________

34 Throughout his ministry Paul received oral and written reports about the health of churches with whom he worked. While any response to news received could be considered "reactive," this dissertation differentiates "proactive" and "reactive" as follows. The term “proactive” is used to describe Paul’s intervention before the health of the church was compromised, although threats may have been imminent. On the other hand, the term “reactive” is used to describe Paul’s response to churches who had already experienced a deterioration in church health.

35 Frank Thielman, Philippians, in vol. 3 of Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, ed. Clint Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 343.
Philippians against falling into theological error regarding circumcision (3:1-4:1).

Finally, Paul encouraged the Philippians to strive for unity (2:15; cf. 1:27; 2:1-11, 14; 4:2).

Of all Paul’s letters, “this one to the Philippians stands out as being the most personal. No sharp rebukes of the congregation mar its joyful spirit: no disturbing problems threaten the progress of the church. The warnings are of a cautionary and preventive nature that are always in order.”

Paul wrote to “the Philippians who were certainly adorning their confession with a life to God’s honor, were willing even to suffer in behalf of Christ, were ever ready to do more than their share in contributing toward the need of others, were, in fact, setting a wonderful example for others to follow,” thus revealing the healthy nature of this congregation. The fact that Paul was prompted to write to a church with few issues to be addressed demonstrates the importance of a proactive approach to church health.

That is not to say that the church in Philippi did not have problems. As noted above, one of the occasions for Paul’s letter was to encourage the Philippians to strive for unity. Syntyche and Euodia were not of the same mind (4:2). It seems, however, that the strife had not yet escalated to a point which hindered the overall effectiveness of the church. Rather than waiting and later reacting to a more severe problem, Paul proactively addressed the issue and called them to embrace an attitude of humility comparable to that of Christ Jesus (2:1-11).

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It also appears that Paul’s warnings against falling into theological error were an attempt to proactively intervene, rather than a response to an unfortunate reality. In his commentary on Philippians, Thielman reasons,

If Paul was in prison in Ephesus when he wrote to the Philippians, then just before writing the letter he may have also written to the Galatians and to the Corinthians. In Galatians Paul appeals to several of his churches not to be convinced by a group of itinerant teachers that they must add observance of the Jewish law to faith in Christ in order to be acquitted before God’s tribunal on the final day. In 1 Corinthians Paul battles against the notion, prominent in the Middle Platonism of the time, that the physical element of reality is to be shunned or demeaned but spiritual and intellectual elements are to be elevated to positions of primacy. In 3:1-4:1 Paul warns the Philippians against both errors, probably not because they had already infected the Philippian community, but because he hopes to prevent the problems he had encountered in Galatia and Corinth from cropping up in Philippi also.38

Paul’s ministry experience with other churches had introduced him to threats which could create unhealthy conditions within a congregation. Once those threats had been identified, he proactively intervened in an attempt to protect the health of the church in Philippi.

**Thessalonica**

Like the church in Philippi, the church in Thessalonica appears to have been a healthy church of whom Paul was proud (1:7; 3:7-10). Nonetheless, the apostle saw the need to write to the young church, offering them instruction and guidance to keep them on the right track.

Paul had received a good report about the church in Thessalonica from his son in the faith, Timothy (3:6). Paul’s letter was a response to Timothy’s report, which he hoped would provide encouragement to the young church. In his commentary on 1

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Thessalonians, Robert Thomas provides a succinct summary of this letter. The summary is revealing in that it speaks to the healthy nature of this congregation while explaining the purpose of Paul’s writing:

Paul had three chief aims in writing the Epistle: (1) to express satisfaction and thanks to God for the healthy spiritual condition of the church (1:2-10), (2) to make a strong case against the false insinuations against himself and his associates (2:1-3:13), and (3) to suggest specific ways in which already strong Christian behavior of the Thessalonians could be improved as they continued to seek God-approved holiness (4:1-5:24).  

The contents of this letter indicate that the church in Thessalonica was indeed healthy. This young church was so impressive that Paul set them forth as an example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). The church in Thessalonica thus serves as another New Testament example of the need to address church health proactively rather than only reacting to problems after the church’s ministry and witness have been compromised.

Even though the church in Thessalonica was healthy at the time, Paul saw lurking threats that he felt compelled to address. One of the threats was the persecution the church had suffered since his departure (3:1-3). Paul had warned the Thessalonian Christians that persecution was inevitable (3:4). That which Paul had spoken of in theory, however, was now a reality for the young church. Paul knew that if he did not meet this threat head on, “these new converts might be persuaded to abandon their commitment to Christianity, thereby wiping out all the time and effort he, Silas, and Timothy had invested.”  

Rather than allowing the church to deteriorate in health, Paul

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39 Thomas, 1 Thessalonians, 233.

intervened by writing “a letter of encouragement, the tenor of which would be ‘You’re doing fine, continue to do so more and more (cf. I Thess 4:1). Do not let persecutions get you down. These are necessary; also, they are to be expected, just as I told you when I was still with you (cf. I Thess 3:2-4).’”

In addition to the persecution of the church, Paul was also concerned about accusations brought against himself and his associates from outside the Christian community (2:1-3:13). These accusations were not simply an assault on Paul, but were an attempt to call into question the validity and integrity of the gospel itself. Religious charlatans and frauds were a dime a dozen in the ancient world, and the way Paul and Silas slipped out of town in the middle of the night would have made it only too easy to pigeonhole them as just one more pair of rip-off artists out to scam people. From here it was only a short step to the conclusion that their message was no more truthful than they were, and thus the people might reject it along with them.

Based on Timothy’s glowing report about the church, no strong reason exists to believe that these accusations had yet caused damage to the church or the work of the gospel. Nevertheless, Paul knew the threat existed and once again acted proactively.

**Ephesus**

The content of the book of Ephesians suggests that, like Philippi and Thessalonica, the churches in the region Ephesus were, for the most part, healthy. In his commentary on Ephesians, Klyne Snodgrass observes, “No crisis appears to be addressed in Ephesians, and no specific opponents are attacked.”

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41Hendriksen and Kistemaker, *Thessalonians*, 12.

42Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 22.

issues which may have compromised the health of the church, Paul chose to write to believers in Ephesus.

The book of Ephesians may be best understood as having two sections. In the first three chapters,

Paul laid the theological foundation for victory in spiritual warfare: *Believers are in Christ*. We are chosen in Him (Eph. 1:4) and we have redemption through His blood (v.7). In Him we have an inheritance (v. 10-11). We have our hope in Him and have been sealed in Him (vv.12-13). We are created in Him for good works (2:10). In Him we have been given life (1:20; 2:5-7). Through Him we have access to God (v. 18).  

Whereas the first three chapters are primarily theological, the final three chapters are primarily practical application. Paul’s point was to encourage the Ephesian believers to let their theology affect their personal walk (4:1-6:9) at church (4:1-5:21), at home (5:22-6:4), and in the workplace (6:5-9). The significance of his instruction is more fully realized as Paul unveiled the threat of spiritual battles believers in Ephesus would inevitably face (6:10-20).

The lack of rebuke in the letter is one indicator that Paul was taking a proactive approach in writing to the church. His purpose was to provide instruction in matters of Christian living rather than confronting obvious problems which had already manifest themselves in unhealthy ways.

The case for a proactive approach in Ephesians is also strengthened by Paul’s conclusion to the letter. In addition to instruction and encouragement, Paul warned the

reveal the church developed problems at a later date. Specifically, Jesus confronts the church in Ephesus for leaving their first love (2:4) and calls on them to repent and do the deeds they did at first (2:5).

44Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 28, italics in original.

church of a real threat—the schemes of the devil (6:10-20). Paul knew the attack on this church was inevitable and he wrote to them, in part, to prepare them to stand and resist in that evil day (6:13). These preventive measures are but another example of Paul’s proactive involvement to protect the health of a church.

Rome

Of all Paul’s letters, his letter to the church in Rome may be the most difficult to categorize in terms of a proactive or reactive approach to church health. In part, the struggle stems from the disagreement among scholars as to the purpose of the letter. Opinions on Paul’s purpose in writing to the Romans “tend to move in two different directions: those that focus on Paul’s own circumstances and needs as the occasion for the letter, and those that address the circumstances of the Christian community in Rome as its immediate occasion. Few solutions ignore one or the other of these factors entirely.”

Therefore, rather than concluding that Paul had a single purpose in writing to the church in Rome, it is best to conclude that he had several reasons for writing, all of which share a common denominator: Paul’s missionary situation. The past battles to define and defend the gospel, the coming crisis in Jerusalem, the need to secure a logistical base for his outreach in Spain, the importance of unifying the Roman Christians around a common vision of the gospel—all these specific purposes conspire to lead Paul to rehearse his understanding of the gospel.

This understanding of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, as well as a careful

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47Douglas Moo, Romans, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 23.
study of the letter’s contents, reveals minimal issues that would lead one to conclude that the church was unhealthy.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, Paul’s desire to have the Roman Christians partner with him in his missionary endeavors to the west (Rom 15:24) also suggests that this church was at least healthy enough to have a meaningful ministry impact. Robert Mounce goes even further in his argument, speculating,

> At Miletus he shared with the Ephesian elders his concern about going to Jerusalem. He told them, ‘In every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me’ (Acts 20:23). Perhaps he would not come through the Jerusalem trip alive. Then would it not have been appropriate for him to write down a relatively comprehensive statement of the gospel he proclaimed so that those in Rome might carry out his plan to evangelize Spain?\textsuperscript{49}

If Mounce is correct, then Paul was looking not only for a ministry partner capable of assisting him with evangelizing Spain (15:24), but also for a church altogether capable of fulfilling that plan should he be killed in Jerusalem. If Rome were to be that church, Paul must have believed they were healthy and trustworthy of such an important task. Thus, he proactively encouraged them to participate in an opportunity to partner with him in his attempt to evangelize Spain.

**Colosse**

The book of Colossians is yet another example of Paul’s responding to a potential threat that had not yet infected the health of the church. In his commentary of Colossians, Curtis Vaughan writes of the danger which had Paul concerned: “The immediate occasion for the writing of Colossians was the arrival of Epaphras (1:8) in

\textsuperscript{48} It should be noted that a schism between Jewish and Gentile Christians did exist in the city of Rome (10:12). Apart from this issue, however, Paul’s letter to the Romans contains no other indication that the church in Rome was unhealthy.

Rome with disturbing news about the presence of heretical teaching at Colosse that was threatening the well-being of the church.\(^5\) While Paul did not go into great detail about the heretical teaching itself, the language he employed in 2:8 speaks to the futuristic nature of the threat facing the Colossians. As David Garland notes, “The future tense in 2:8 translated literally (‘Beware lest there will be someone who will take you captive’) indicates that this is a danger, not something that has already happened.”\(^51\)

The threatening heresy in Colosse was likely the propaganda of opponents from outside the church rather than the teaching of members within the church. Garland again argues convincingly,

The evidence does not suggest that visitors from outside have somehow wormed their way into the church or that wrongheaded members of the church have become charmed by the lures of outside cults and practices. The opponents are outsiders. Most have argued that the error has some Jewish dimensions. . . . The most streamlined view that adequately explains all the data is that newly formed Gentile Christians in Colosse are being badgered about their faith by contentious Jews who took affront over their claims. Jews could argue persuasively from the same Scriptures used by Christians. Consequently, they would be far more intimidating and devastating to a young, developing church than a pagan syncretistic philosophy, a mystery religion, or a folk religion with a potpourri of superstitions and practices.\(^52\)

If the heretical teaching had come from within the congregation, Paul’s approach to improving church health would have been reactive. Since, however, the heretical teaching came from outside the Christian community and had not yet infected the congregation, Paul’s approach is best understood as a proactive measure to protect the


\(^52\)Ibid., 26-27.
health of the church in Colosse.

Summary

Paul’s letters to the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Rome, and Colosse demonstrate the need to proactively protect both the church and the work of the gospel. In each case, Paul intervened to address lurking threats before the health of the local church or the work of the gospel was diminished. To some, the frequency of Paul’s utilizing a proactive approach may be surprising. In fact, many churches today do not even consider the need to consult with outsiders until a problem surfaces and the damage is done.

Paul enjoyed a unique relationship with these churches that allowed him to proactively intervene in many of the churches he had planted. Revitalization agents today are not often privy to that type of relationship. Consequently, church leaders should see the value of the proactive approach to church health and consistently invite outside experts to evaluate their work with fresh eyes and offer needed guidance. By engaging in regular check-ups, church leaders can help the health of their church body much like routine physicals can serve to protect the health of one’s physical body.

A Reactive Approach to Church Health

In many cases, problems in a church manifest themselves primarily in the form of symptoms. Only after symptoms appear do church leaders realize a problem exists, and only then do leaders seek help. Their response is therefore a reactive one. The biblical text does not fall short in giving leaders what they need to lead churches through these trying times, however.
Paul’s letters, in fact, provide insights that can help church leaders in their pursuit of church health as they respond to issues. These insights will be examined in following chapters, while at this point biblical examples of a reactive approach to church health concerns will be reviewed.

**Corinth**

The church in Corinth may have been the unhealthiest church of all that Paul addressed in writing. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recalled the grief he experienced when initially addressing the numerous issues which hindered their effectiveness: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you” (2:4). History has come to remember Paul’s second letter to the church as “the ‘severe letter,’ the ‘sorrowful letter,’ or the ‘letter of tears.’”

The issues which illustrated the unhealthy condition of the church in Corinth were many. Paul learned of the issues within the church, at least in part, from Chloe’s people (1 Cor 1:11). He then reacted to the news he had received by writing to the church to address these unhealthy conditions. Paul’s purpose in writing the first letter was to rectify certain serious doctrinal and moral sins and irregularities of Christian living, including disorderly conduct in worship. These aberrations included false views of the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15), incest, adultery, and other sexual immorality (1 Cor 5). They also included unchristian action in taking fellow Christians to court (1 Cor 6), misuse of Christian liberty (1

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Cor 8 and 10), disorders in observing the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34) and other disorders in the worship service (1 Cor 14).  

Paul’s letters, however, are only one approach he utilized to address the health of the church in Corinth. As Kistemaker notes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Paul did not stop there. In addition to the letters, Paul used “emissaries (Timothy and Titus), and personal visits.”  

All of these examples are demonstrative of Paul’s reactive approach he hoped would revitalize this church.

Galatia

The church in Galatia is another example of Paul’s ministry of revitalization. Specifically, the book of Galatians demonstrates Paul’s concern for theology and its implications on church health. In his book, Discipled Warriors, Lawless speaks to the way many underestimate the significance of sound theology in church health: “Many current approaches to church health wrongly assume that each church adopting that approach desires to be a biblically sound, New Testament church. Little attention is given to the theological foundation of a church—which is, in my judgment, a critical error.”

Paul wrote to the Galatians with the goal of helping them think correctly about the doctrine of soteriology, or the way of salvation. Such a letter was necessary considering people had infiltrated Paul’s Galatian “mission-field and were persuading his converts there to accept a different form of teaching from that which he had given them.  

54W. Harold Mare, 1 Corinthians, in vol. 10 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 180-01.

55Kistemaker, 1 Corinthians, 20.

56Lawless, Discipled Warriors, 22.
According to the information reaching Paul, they were trying to impose on the Galatian Christians some requirements of the Jewish law, preeminently circumcision; there is also some word of the observance of special days.”

In 4:10, for example, Paul described their practice of celebrating special Jewish holidays on certain days, months, seasons, and years. In 5:6 he described the Galatians as “seeking to be justified by the law.” These realities, of which Paul had somehow been informed, prompted him to react to the dire situation in Galatia.

Polhill’s analysis of 1:6-9 is helpful in pinpointing the purpose of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. He notes,

This paragraph sets forth the occasion which prompted Paul to write the epistle. ‘Some people’ (indefinite) were throwing the Galatians into confusion, attempting to pervert the gospel (v. 7). And the Galatians were following their lead! Employing military language, Paul said that they were ‘deserting’ their calling in Christ (v. 6). Paul often used the word calling to refer to one’s being called into the body of Christ, that is, to one’s Christian commitment. Here at the outset he stated what really had him concerned about the Galatians; they were abandoning their original Christian calling for a false gospel. They were turning away from grace (5:4).

The book of Galatians, therefore, is a record of Paul’s reaction to the unhealthy situation within this church. Clearly, Paul wrote to encourage a healthy understanding of the true gospel message.

Summary

A survey of Paul’s letters to churches offers many insights about church health today. First, Paul demonstrated the importance of being proactively involved in

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58 Polhill, Paul and His Letters, 145, italics in original.
protecting the church and the work of the gospel. Many of his letters are examples of a proactive approach to church revitalization rather than the more common reactive approach typically seen today.

Second, Paul modeled the need to respond to churches when the health of the church had already been compromised. While Paul worked hard to protect the health of local churches, there were times when news of a reached him after damage had been done. In those cases, Paul sought to understand the problem(s) and then reacted with letters, emissaries, and even personal trips to the hurting churches.

**Conclusion**

The Bible is not simply a history book that records the establishment and early formation of the Christian church. Instead, it serves as a continual source of instruction to inform and equip the church in matters of health and effectiveness. Whether churches today are relatively healthy or gravely ill, Paul’s ministry offers insights for church leaders and revitalization agents who are working to improve or maintain church health in America.

The insights extracted from Paul’s correspondence with churches can be used not only to strengthen the local church, but also to strengthen the enterprise of church consulting. To date, the field of church consulting has yet to develop a stated, thorough biblical basis for the work it performs. As long as consultants continue to work from business models and their own understanding of church health, they are likely to miss critical insights which have the potential to improve the health of the church in America. A return to a scriptural foundation is in order.
CHAPTER 3
PAUL’S STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Introduction

In his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald McGavran argued, “As we look at any case of growth or nongrowth, whether it be a local church or an entire denomination, we find that understanding it involves consideration of three important sets of factors.”¹ The three factors which McGavran identified in his research are contextual factors, institutional factors, and spiritual factors.

While McGavran specifically argued for a correlation between understanding these three factors and achieving church growth, it is reasonable to conclude that these factors affect church health as well, especially if one ascribes to the adage that a healthy church is a growing church.² An analysis of Paul’s revitalization ministry will reveal that Paul had a strategy to help churches confront these three factors. This chapter will examine Paul’s strategy for addressing contextual factors in his work with churches.

Definition and Examples: Contextual Factors

Before an analysis of Paul’s strategy for addressing contextual factors can


²Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 14.
begin, one must understand the term, “contextual factors.” McGavran defined contextual factors as “political, sociological, cultural, and environmental factors over which the church or the mission has no control.”

He further described these factors by explaining, “They may be local factors or they may extend to regions and entire nations. Church growth is slow in a country like Albania, for example, because of a national contextual factor: religion is outlawed and offenders are severely punished.”

McGavran’s definition acknowledges that contextual factors are beyond the control of the local church. For example, a church cannot control the population of its surrounding community. If a church is located in a community experiencing a sharp decline in population, the church may see a corollary decline in its attendance. On the other hand, if the church is located in a community that is growing rapidly, the church is more likely to see an increase in attendance. In both cases the church is subject to the external, contextual factor of population growth.

That is not to say, however, that churches are victims of contextual factors. In fact, in Paul’s day certain contextual factors actually assisted in the advance of the gospel. The context in which Christianity evolved played a crucial role in the development of Christianity in its formative years. For example, as church historian Justo Gonzalez notes,

The early Christians did not believe that the time and place of the birth of Jesus had been left to chance. On the contrary, they saw the hand of God preparing the advent of Jesus in all events prior to the birth, and in all the historical circumstances around it. The same could be said about the birth of the church, which resulted from

\[^3\text{McGavran, Understanding Church Growth, 19.}\]
\[^4\text{Ibid.}\]
the work of Jesus.\(^5\)

Gonzalez reveals the importance of contextual factors by highlighting the context into which God sent His Son and established His church. This specific time in human history provided a context in which the Christian faith was conducive to explosive growth.

**Political Factors**

One contextual factor which contributed to the rapid expanse of Christianity was the political climate. The political climate in Paul’s day is known as the *Pax Romana*. The *Pax Romana*, or “Roman peace,” was “an epoch of relative peace and stability that had witnessed the appearance of the Messiah and the birth of the Christian church. This reading of history can be traced back to Paul himself, who told the Galatians that God had sent his Son into the world ‘when the time had fully come’ (4:4).”\(^6\)

In regard to the timing of Jesus’ birth and the establishment of the church, Michael Green has argued

that probably no period in the history of the world was better suited to receive the infant Church than the first century AD, when, under an Empire which was literally worldwide, the scope for the spread and understanding of the faith was enormous. . .

In the earliest account we have of the spread of Christianity, the Acts of the Apostles, the debt owed to Greece, Rome and Jewry is plain on almost every page.\(^7\)

Historically, the *Pax Romana* has been attributed with contributing to the development of Christianity. Origen, for example, wrote,

> There is abundance of peace which began at the birth of Christ, God preparing the nations for his teaching, that they might be under one prince, the king of the


Romans, and that it might not be more difficult, owing the lack of unity between nations due to the existence of many kingdoms for Jesus’ apostles to accomplish the task laid upon them by their Master, when he said: ‘Go and teach all nations.’

A world governed by the Roman Empire, thus, created a context where early Christians could more easily take the gospel to different peoples of the earth without encountering the obstacle of national borders.

**Transportation Factors**

This time of relative peace under a unified kingdom had a practical impact on the rapid spread of Christianity. Early Christians seeking to take the gospel to the ends of the earth could travel on “well-paved and well-guarded roads ran to the most distant provinces.” That travel facilitated trade, and “thus Christianity often reached a new region, not through the work of missionaries or preachers, but rather through traveling traders, slaves, and others.” Most of these evangelists were, in fact, “nameless Christians [who] were merchants, slaves, and others who traveled for various reasons, but whose travel provided the opportunity for the expansion of the Christian message.” In that sense, the political context provided safe and swift travel for early Christians seeking to fulfill the Great Commission.

**Communication Factors**

Another contextual factor which contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity

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10Ibid.

11Ibid., 25-27.
was the common Greek language which was spoken in the day. Green has suggested
that,

The advantages for the Christian mission of having a common language can hardly be overestimated. It did away with the necessity for missionary language schools . . . Moreover, it was a sensitive, adaptable language, ideally suited for the propagation of a theological message, because for centuries it had been used to express the reflections of some of the world’s greatest thinkers, and thus had a ready-made philosophical and theological vocabulary.12

The use of a common language allowed missionaries to travel across the known world to proclaim the gospel without having to overcome language barriers.

These contextual factors listed above and others established an ideal environment in which the gospel could spread quickly across the known world. Timothy George has detailed this fact in summary fashion by writing,

Under Caesar Augustus and the emperors who succeeded him the Roman Empire was fused into a unified political entity with one common language, a centralized military organization, a shared legal system, a uniform mail and transportation service, a single monetary currency, and an interconnected pattern of trade and commerce. Never before or since have all the shores of the Mediterranean been under one single rule. The earliest heralds of the Christian gospel coursed along the major highways and well-developed sea routes of the Roman Empire as they continuously ‘gossiped’ (cf. Phillips translation of Acts 8:4) the story of Jesus in all of the great urban and commercial centers of the known world.13

These contextual factors were beyond the control of the church, yet nevertheless had a positive impact on its effectiveness. That is not to say, however, that all of the contextual factors were positive ones. Indeed, some political factors posed a threat and a challenge to the early Christians. In order to achieve greater unity, imperial policy sought religious uniformity by following two routes: religious syncretism—the indiscriminate mixing of elements from various religions—and emperor worship. . . . In that atmosphere, Jews and Christians were seen as

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12Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 34.

unbending fanatics who insisted on the sole worship of their One God—an alien
cyst that must be removed for the good of society.¹⁴

Persecution

Christians who resisted conforming to the culture were often persecuted. For
example, in Acts 16:14-24 Luke tells the story of Paul and Silas who were taken before
the chief magistrates after casting a spirit out of a slave girl who was “bringing her
masters much profit by fortune-telling” (16:16). The two men were accused of “throwing
our city into confusion” (16:20) and “proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to
accept or to observe, being Romans” (16:21).¹⁵ The cultural context permitted the chief
magistrate to have Paul and Silas beaten with rods and imprisoned in an attempt to put an
end to their missionary activity. These beatings, however, did not hinder the work or the
spread of the gospel.

Of all the hardships Paul endured, “none receives more attention in his letters
than persecution on account of the gospel. He was persecuted by Jews, Gentiles, and
false Christians (2 Cor 11:26).”¹⁶ Violent reactions were a common response in the


Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 6-7. O’Brien explains the accusation brought against Paul
and Silas by writing, “The masters of the slave girl, who made their livelihood from her powers of
divination, were enraged at Paul’s action; and since they could not make the expulsion of a spirit of
soothsaying the ground of an accusation, they charged him and Silas before the praetors with being
vagabond Jews (thus playing on the anti-Jewish prejudices of their fellow citizens) who were causing
trouble in the city and advocating customs unlawful for Romans (16:20-21)! The accusation against Paul
and Silas, then, was an attempt to pit the two missionaries as revolutionaries who were a threat to the
peaceful state of the Roman Empire. Such an accusation was serious and was more likely to solicit the
punitive response the accuser was seeking.

context which Paul shared the gospel. Nevertheless, Paul preached Christ and rejoiced in his tribulations, “knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope” (Rom 5:3-4).

Cultural Misconceptions

In addition to persecution, early missionaries of the Christian faith also had to overcome the obstacle of cultural misconceptions. Both Jews and Gentiles alike struggled to understand the Christian faith. Jews, for example, were outright offended to think of a carpenter-teacher as the summit of Israel’s development. It was not easy to think of someone so recent as embodying a wisdom greater than that of Moses long ago. It was not easy to believe that an unordained rabbi who often came into conflict with the official exponents of the Torah could be the divinely authenticated teacher of Israel. This was why in his lifetime so few of the religious leaders had any faith in him. But, after his execution, it was not merely difficult; it was preposterous to think of him as Messiah. By definition the Messiah was a deliverer, a conqueror.17

Missionaries serving in Jewish contexts, therefore, were forced to deal with these misconceptions as they sought to advance the gospel among the Jews.

Misconceptions were not isolated to the Jewish segment of the population. Gentiles struggled to understand certain practices of the Christian faith. Green has noted that those associated with the Christian cause were often thought to be involved in the criminal activities of atheism, incest, and cannibalism. Christians were accused of atheism “because they did not do honour to the customary gods.”18 Additionally, they met in secret and employed “realistic language about feeding on Christ in the Eucharist, and they spoke of loving fellow-Christians, whom they called brothers and sisters in

17 Green, Evangelism in the Early Church, 52.
18 Ibid., 63.
Christ.” Early Christians could not control the fact that these perceptions were present in the culture. They could, however, engage those who held these perceptions in an attempt to offer clarification and advance the gospel.

Summary

This brief overview of Paul’s ministry context reveals the impact contextual factors can have on the work of the local church. On the one hand, the Pax Romana created a context in which the early church could flourish and exhibit signs of strong health. On the other hand, the Pax Romana “was based on violence and oppression, and Paul, despite his legal status, had to endure harsh treatment at the hands of Roman officials as well as Jewish authorities.”

A review of Paul’s letters shows that he understood the influence of contextual factors on churches. In order to advise churches properly, he developed a thorough understanding of the context in which the churches he advised sought to minister. This dissertation now turns to principles that Paul’s writings suggest for addressing contextual issues in church revitalization.

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19Ibid.

20In his book The Story of Christianity, Justo Gonzales identifies some of the early Church’s main apologists and their works. Specifically, Gonzales mentions Justin, who before dying as a martyr “lived through a long spiritual pilgrimage, from school to school, until he found in Christianity what he called ‘the true philosophy.’” Three of his works are extant: two apologies—which are really two parts of a single work—and a Dialogue with Trypho, a Jewish rabbi. One of Justin’s disciples, Tatian, wrote An Address to the Greeks, and at about the same time Athenagoras composed a Plea for the Christians and a treatise On the Resurrection of the Dead.” Justo Gonzales, The Story of Christianity, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), 52.

21George, Galatians, 29.
Principle 1: Know the Community

One aspect of Paul’s ministry which strengthened his effectiveness was his knowledge of the community. In Acts 22:22 Paul faced a violent mob who “raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live.’” Prior to the administration of punishment, Paul “told the centurion that he was a Roman citizen. Though Roman citizens who had been convicted of some crime could have scourging decreed as a punishment, they were exempt from it as a method of inquiry before trial. The commander was therefore saved from breaking the law any further, for he was wrong to even order the flogging.” In this case, Paul’s knowledge of his community preserved his health and possibly even his life, allowing his ministry to continue.

Paul’s knowledge of the community was not, though, simply a tactic to preserve his life and extend his ministry. In his work with churches, Paul could avoid making generic recommendations because he knew the community and the churches. He used a variety of methods to gain an understanding of the community the church was attempting to reach with the gospel. Paul developed a thorough understanding of the community by spending time in the city (Acts 17:2; 18:11; 19:9-10; 20:31) and by meeting with church representatives (2 Cor 8:23) who could explain community dynamics which influenced the church’s effectiveness. The knowledge Paul acquired through these methods enabled him to contextualize the gospel and speak to specific issues which affected the church’s health.23

Paul’s Knowledge of Religious Persecution

As noted earlier, one contextual factor churches sometimes faced in their community was the threat of persecution. The Greek verb διώχω (Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6), translated as “‘persecute,’ has the basic notion of ‘to cause something to run,’ ‘pursue or chase,’ as an army pursuing its enemy and putting it to flight or a hunter chasing his quarry and causing it to flee.” Such was the common experience of churches in Paul’s day. R. Kent Hughes has colorfully described this reality of the early church by writing, “Following the church through Acts is like following a wounded deer through a forest. Drops of blood mark the trail.” While faithful believers could not control whether or not they experienced persecution, Paul could prepare them for it because he suffered persecution himself.

Prior to his conversion, Paul’s own zeal for Judaism and the law led him to persecute the church (Phil 3:6). Post-conversion, Paul endured persecution at the hands of zealous synagogue rulers (Acts 13:45-50; 14:5; 18:4-6). As one who had both persecuted Christians and been persecuted as a Christian, Paul was personally familiar with this issue. Consequently, his familiarity with the subject made him a credible witness who could advise churches on this contextual matter.

In fact, the book of Acts records numerous examples where Paul experienced

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23 The issues covered in this section—religious persecution, religious pluralism, and religious practices—are only examples of some of the contextual factors which Paul addressed as he advised churches. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list of contextual factors found throughout Pauline literature. Instead, these examples reveal just how important it is to understand the community before offering advice to a local church.

24 O’Brien, Epistle to the Phillipians, 376.

firsthand knowledge of resistance to the proclamation of the gospel. For instance, during his first missionary journey Paul had experienced some degree of success in speaking to the Jews—so much so that he and Barnabas had been invited back to the synagogue on a consecutive Sabbath to speak again. Acts 13:44-45 records, “The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.”

When Paul and Barnabas elected to take their message to the Gentiles, the Jewish leaders’ attack became a physical reality. The synagogue leaders were “envious of Paul and Barnabas because of the unexpected response they have received from the Gentiles. These Jews realize that their religious influence is waning, because the Gentile converts have now accepted the teachings of Christ”\(^\text{26}\) rather than the teachings of Judaism. Consequently, jealousy poisons the minds of the Jews and impels them to seek support from high-ranking women who are still frequenting the synagogue worship services. . . . The Jews have these influential women persuade the leading men of the city to instigate a persecution against Paul and Barnabas. The Jews want the city fathers to take their side, stir up a persecution against the missionaries, and banish Paul and Barnabas from Pisidia. . . . The persecution instigated by the Jews and permitted by the city authorities not only touches the lives of the new Christians but also leads to the expulsion of the two missionaries.\(^\text{27}\)

Just a few verses later, Luke recorded yet another scheme to attack Paul and his colleague Barnabas. This time, the two had entered the synagogue in Iconium and experienced similar success in evangelizing the Jews and Greeks. When the synagogue


\(^{27}\) Ibid.
leaders observed their success, Acts reports, “But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren” (14:2). Initially, Paul and Barnabas responded by “speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord” (14:3). Eventually, however, “there was a ‘plot’ (hormē) brewing among some of the Gentiles and Jews to mistreat and stone them. The word hormē connotes impulsiveness and suggests an action not controlled by reason, which is exactly how Luke viewed the opposition at Iconium.” 28 The picture here resembles that “of mob violence rather than expulsion by the city officials, as was the case in Pisidian Antioch (13:50).” 29 After learning of the plot against them, Paul and Barnabas escaped and departed for Iconium.

God would eventually use these experiences in Paul’s life for the betterment of the church. Because Paul had personally endured persecution, he was able to write valuable words of encouragement and instruction to the church in Thessalonica as they endured afflictions for their faith in Christ (1 Thess 3:3-4; 4:1). Likewise, Paul could say to the church in Corinth, “we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:8). Behind his words of encouragement and instruction was an in-depth, firsthand, experiential knowledge of this contextual issue. This knowledge of conflict with leaders made Paul an invaluable resource for churches immersed in a difficult context.


Paul’s Knowledge of Religious Pluralism

Another example of a contextual issue which Paul encountered in his ministry was religious pluralism. The churches which Paul advised were located in communities which adhered to a variety of theological and philosophical concepts. The context in which he ministered was “marked by a great longing for redemption and filled with many new religious options to supply it. Chief among these were the various mystery religions, originally tribal cults imported into the empire through the Hellenizing of the East.”

Additionally, “Greek philosophical concepts drawn from the teachings of Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Neo-Pythagoreans, and others became the common possession of educated people throughout the empire.”

Over time, however, people grew “impatient of the worthless deities they had traditionally worshipped. It has been well said of the Greeks that it was not that they became so depraved that they abandoned their gods, but rather that the gods became so

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30 George, *Galatians*, 26. George expounds on this idea by listing some of the mystery religions which had infiltrated the communities in which Paul conducted his ministry. Specifically, he writes, “From Syria came the cult of Adonis, from Egypt that of Isis and Osiris, from Phrygia that of Cybele and Attis. Each of these religions offered salvation of the soul and immortality through a secret rite on initiation by which the initiate was mystically united with the savior-god. In these ceremonies the myth of the dying and rising deity was reenacted through baptism and participation in a sacred meal.” Gonzalez adds further clarification on the ambiguous term “mystery religions” by writing, “The syncretism of the times could also been [sic] seen in what historians now call ‘mystery religions.’ ” These were not centered on the ancient Olympian deities, but on others which seemed to be much more personal. In earlier times, people generally had followed the religion of their birthplace. But now, after the conquest of Alexander and Rome, which gods one was to serve became a matter of personal choice. Therefore, one did not belong to a mystery religion by birth, but rather by initiation. Most of these religions were based on myths regarding the origin of the world, the sustenance of life, and the life of the deity. From Egypt came the myth of Isis and Osiris, which explained the fertility of the Nile and all other fertility. Greece contributed rites that from time immemorial had been celebrated near Athens. The cult of Mithra, a god of Indo-Iranian origin, was very popular in the army. Others worshiped the Great Mother of Semitic origin. Given the syncretism of all these religions, soon they were so intermingled that today it is exceedingly difficult for historians to determine which doctrine or practice arose in which context.” Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 15-16.

depraved that they were abandoned by the people." The unsatisfied longing for redemption revealed by the inadequacies of polytheism created a “tentative move towards monotheism” that Paul was able to capitalize on throughout his ministry.

Also prevalent in this context was, of course, Judaism. Paul regularly dealt with the reality of Judaism in his writings, and frequently did so by referring to his own Jewish heritage (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:13-17; 1 Cor 15:8-10; 2 Cor 11:22; and Rom 11:1). Additionally, Acts 17:1-2 reports that Paul’s custom upon entering a city was to go first to the synagogue and reason with the Jews. While the church had no control over the religion it first found in the area, it was responsible for evangelizing those in the community. Therefore, understanding the Jewish culture would have been important for Paul as he helped churches in those cities. Paul assisted the churches he advised by instructing them in ways to deal with opposition from Jewish leaders.

While many of Paul’s letters contain traces of his dealings with religious pluralism, three of his letters in particular can be used to summarize his approach in combating the leading theological and philosophical concepts of his day. First, Ephesians reveals Paul’s strategy for protecting the church against the teachings of the mystery religions. Second, Colossians shows his approach in protecting the church from Greek philosophy. Finally, Philippians reveals his approach for protecting the church from Jewish syncretism.


33 Ibid.

In order for Paul’s churches to be healthy, they would need to combat religious pluralism, both for the good of the unbeliever as well as for the protection of believers. The church in Ephesus was especially subject to this threat. The Ephesian Christians “lived in a pagan, if ‘spiritual,’ society. Magical occultism was common. Belief in both good and evil powers influenced every area of life. Worship of the goddess Diana dominated the area, and more than forty other gods were worshiped in the city.”35 It is not surprising then to discover Paul addressing the reality of the spirit world in his letter to the churches in the area of Ephesus.

Paul himself recognized the reality of a plurality of spirit beings. As Polhill has observed, Paul “speaks of the demonic consistently in the plural. Paul spoke of our struggle against a whole host of spiritual powers hostile to God—‘rulers,’ ‘authorities,’ ‘powers’ (v. 12). They are not human authorities, not ‘flesh and blood,’ but ‘spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.’”36 Paul, however, was not writing to the church in Ephesus to affirm the teachings of religious pluralism; instead, he wrote to help the church think correctly about what is occurring “in the heavenly places,” a phrase that is found five times throughout the book (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).

Specifically, Paul wanted the church to know that “in the heavenly places” they had been blessed (1:3), they had victory with Christ (1:20; 2:6), this “mystery” religion had been made known (3:9-10), and a struggle remained which required them to

35Lawless, Discipled Warriors, 27. Polhill believes “Paul spent two-and-one-half to three years in Ephesus, the major part of his third mission.” During this time, Paul would have become familiar with the religious thought life in Ephesus, making him a credible advisor to speak on this matter. Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 219.

36Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 372, italics in original.
put on the full armor of God (6:12). Arnold argues that Paul spoke to the Ephesians about God’s surpassing power in 1:19 because “spiritual power is a huge issue for these people. They are accustomed to seeking spiritual power through their magical practices. . . With language that is emphatic, Paul assures them that God’s power is beyond that of any competing spirit power, god, or goddess.” Hence, Paul used his knowledge of the religious context in Ephesus to contextualize the gospel and combat a faulty understanding of the spirit world which potentially could corrupt the health of the Ephesian church.

In addition to Ephesians, Paul’s letter to the Colossians reveals concern about the threat religious pluralism posed to the church. In 2:4 Paul disclosed his partial motive for writing: “I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.” Then again in 2:8 he warned the church, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

In these verses, the threat to the health of the church in Colosse becomes apparent. As Hendriksen explains in his commentary on this passage,

It becomes clear, therefore, that in this entire section (verses 1-10) Paul indicates that he was deeply concerned about the false teaching of those whose speculative theories, cleverly presented, might tend to undermine the confidence of

37 Clinton Arnold, Ephesians, in vol. 3 of Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, ed. Clinton Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 307. Arnold notes that Paul used the term “mystery” which was a term widely known in the ancient world. Paul, however, was not speaking of the “mystery religions” which were typically understood when this term was used. Instead, “The mystery Paul is talking about here is substantially different from this. He is speaking about God’s plan that can only be known through revelation.”

38 Arnold, Ephesians, 310.
the Colossians in Christ as their complete Savior. He calls this subversive system of thought and morals, of rules and regulations ‘philosophy and empty deceit.’ He uses words like ‘man-made tradition’ and ‘worldly rudiments’ to describe it.\textsuperscript{39}

The fact that Paul describes the message of the false teachers as a “philosophy” (2:8) suggests that he saw remnants of Greek philosophy peppered throughout this teaching. In his commentary on the text, George has argued that “Paul was not completely rejecting the Greek philosophical tradition en toto, but he clearly was subordinating it to the ‘wisdom of God’ and the gospel of grace he received ‘by revelation from Jesus Christ.’\textsuperscript{40} If George is correct in his understanding, this “persuasive argument” (2:4) would have been a subtle threat to the church in Colosse, making Paul’s assistance all the more necessary. Paul’s primary concern, at least for the moment, was to protect the church from heretical teachings. He protected the church by exposing the lies of his opponents and reminding the church of truth.

Fortunately, Paul was familiar with the major ideas of Greek philosophy and could contest its views when presenting the gospel to a pagan audience, as he did with elegance in his famous address before the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Upon arriving in Athens, Paul had observed a city full of idols (17:16). Though Paul was likely disgusted by the practice of idolatry in Athens, “he acted with restraint and respect in his outward behavior among the idolaters. Thus, ‘he reasoned in the synagogue . . . as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there’ (v. 17).\textsuperscript{41} Paul’s


\textsuperscript{40}George, Galatians, 26, italics in original. Even though George’s commentary is on the book of Galatians, he expounds on Colossians 2:8 because of the biblical example it provides for Paul combating Greek philosophies.

\textsuperscript{41}Fernando, Acts, 473-74.
rational approach among the philosophers proved to be an effective model, for some chose to believe and others inquired further into his claim regarding the resurrection of the dead (17:32, 34).

Evidence of Paul’s experience with the philosophical tradition is not isolated to his work before the Areopagus in Athens, however. Additionally, on at least three occasions Paul revealed his familiarity with Greek culture by incorporating quotations from Greek poets into his speeches and letters (1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12; Acts 27:28). In 1 Corinthians 15:33 Paul quoted a “popular Greek proverb, this one first attributed to the fourth-century B.C. comic playwright Menander (v. 33).”\(^{42}\) In Titus 1:12 Paul quoted Epimenides,

> a well-known and highly esteemed sixth-century Cretan philosopher. The line, which offers an unflattering assessment of the Cretan character, is introduced by Paul in a direct manner to emphasize its source to be none other than a revered Cretan: “Even one of their own prophets has said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’”\(^{43}\)

Finally, in Acts 27:28 Paul described his dismal scene aboard a ship that is on the brink of shipwreck. Recalling the shipwreck of Odysseus in *Odyssey*, Paul said the pagan sailors prayed to their gods for daylight to come and for deliverance through the terrors of the night.\(^{44}\)

It is also apparent that a diversity of religious teaching was a threat to the church in Philippi. O’Brien has described the religious context of the Philippians as


\(^{43}\)Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin, Jr., *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 289.

\(^{44}\)Polhill, *Acts*, 525.
“quite mixed in their backgrounds. The city exhibited a remarkable variety of divinities and cults. . . . The religious climate at the time of Paul’s arrival was syncretistic.”

This syncretism was a form of false teaching threatening to seep into the church at the time Paul wrote his letter.

Paul warned the church to “beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision” (3:2) because Jewish Christians were seeking to add portions of their Judaism to the pure teachings of Christianity. Hendriksen adds further insight into the threat of false teaching when he writes that the, “Judaizers are attacking the doctrine of salvation by grace alone and are striving to substitute for it a mixture of divine favor and human merit, with emphasis on the latter.”

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote of the Jewish leaders’ tendency to boast in the flesh according to the law. Reflecting on his own tendencies as a former Jew, Paul wrote, “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless” (3:4-6). This statement was intended

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45 O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 4-5.

46 Frank Thielman, *Philippians*, in vol. 3 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clinton Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 359-60. Thielman adds insight into Paul’s threefold warning by noting that it is difficult to capture the force of Paul’s rhetoric in an English translation. In Greek, “the statement consists of three clauses all beginning with the same verb (‘watch out!’) and each verb’s direct object begins with a ‘k’ sound.” Additionally, he adds that Paul was referring here to “Jewish Christians who teach that circumcision, dietary observance, and Sabbath keeping are all necessary requirements, in addition to faith in Christ, for salvation.” This explanation adds more weight to the argument that Paul was confronting the threat of religious pluralism in his letter to the Philippians.

to demonstrate that, “Not only can Paul match the grounds that the Jew or Judaizer had for boasting in himself, he can even outstrip them.”

Paul’s testimony also demonstrates his personal knowledge of the culture, while emphasizing his ability to advise church leaders who were dealing with teachers placing an unhealthy emphasis on works. The fact that Paul was writing to Christians in 3:4-6, signified by his address to the “brethren” in 3:1, is significant. This designation reveals that Paul was not confronting the Judaizers personally, but was instead enlightening the church with the knowledge they needed to maintain a healthy understanding of the need to boast in Christ alone rather than works (3:7).

For a moment, the apostle “puts himself on the side of the Judaizer in order to show that he possesses everything in which the latter boasted.” This inside perspective, which Paul claimed from his experience as a Jewish leader himself, provided the church with the knowledge needed to deal with these opponents who had failed to realize that “their reliance on ‘works’ is in the end harmful both to themselves and to others.”

Paul’s firsthand knowledge of the Jewish demographic thus contributed to his ability to advise this church.

These examples further demonstrate Paul’s familiarity with the Greek poets, philosophers, and Judaizers who so heavily influenced his culture. Paul’s understanding of the common thought life in his day prepared him to effectively evangelize those he encountered. More importantly for this study, however, this knowledge made him a

48 O’Brien, The Epistle to the Philippians, 367.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 356.
valuable resource for churches ministering in a context where religious pluralism was pervasive.

**Paul’s Knowledge of Religious Practices**

In addition to combating the threat of religious pluralism, Paul also advised churches serving in contexts where a variety of religious practices were utilized in pagan worship. The religious practices which Paul addressed in his revitalization ministry included “such things as circumcision, feasts, food and drink, angel worship, etc.”51 In order for Paul to effectively advise churches on proper worship practices, he needed a thorough knowledge of alternative expressions of worship in the community which may have corrupted the health of the church.

The clearest example of this contextual issue may be found in Paul’s work with the church in Corinth. The Christians in Corinth struggled, in particular, with the ethical practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed in worship to pagan gods. Kistemaker has elaborated on this practice in an attempt to shed light on the context and nature of the Corinthians’ struggle:

In Paul’s day, pagan sacrifices were religious acts that involved the family. Animals brought to the priest were slaughtered and sacrificed to the gods. Certain parts were burned on the altar, other parts were taken by the priest, and the rest of the consecrated meat was returned to the family that had offered the animal as a sacrifice. The family would invite friends and relatives, among whom were Christians, to a feast. At other times, consecrated meat was sold in the markets. Christians then bought the meat and consumed it in their homes. Members of the Corinthian church faced the question whether they should eat the meat that had been consecrated to an idol in a pagan temple.52

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51Hendriksen, *Colossians*, 110.

Paul had, no doubt, become familiar with this contextual issue during the year and a half he spent in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:11). His extended stay afforded him numerous opportunities to see firsthand the pagan worship practices in the temple and the sacrificed meat hanging in the market.

Paul also addressed this issue in his letter to the Romans. In 14:2 Paul wrote of the existing division, saying, “One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.” In this letter, Paul concludes that “believers are to make every effort to do those things that lead to peace and to mutual upbuilding. Although peace with God was central in Paul’s thought, the peace he spoke of here was peace within the family of believers (cf. Psalm 34:15).”

It seems clear, then, that Paul had a working knowledge of this contextual issue. This knowledge, which he acquired from his time in the city of Corinth and the reports he had received, enabled him to advise these churches on this complex issue. He could address the issue with a sense of depth and detail (1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:14-33; Rom 14:1-23) that would enable the church to make wise choices about this complicated issue.

Paul exhibited a thorough understanding of each contextual factor addressed in this section. These factors were external factors over which the church had no control,

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53 Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 339. It is also probable that Paul gained knowledge of the Corinthians’ struggle with this religious practice from a letter he received from the Corinthians. In 1 Cor 7:1 Paul signaled that he was now addressing “the things about which you wrote.” The Corinthians had apparently written to Paul about problems in the church and questions they had about the Christian life. Paul proceeded to address the issue of eating food which had been used in pagan worship, both in chaps. 8 and 10. Kistemaker expresses certainty in this theory when he writes, “This discussion had its origin in the letter that Paul received (e.g., see 7:1), in which the Corinthians asked him about food sacrificed to idols. In chapter 8, Paul begins as he does because of the way the Corinthians had made their points. In chapter 10, Paul works more from his own agenda.”

but nevertheless affected the health of the church. It was Paul’s knowledge of these contextual factors which contributed to his effectiveness as he worked with churches to improve their health.

**Principle 2: Love the People of the Community**

Paul’s revitalization ministry was marked not only by an in-depth understanding of contextual factors which affected the health of the church positively and negatively. In addition to knowing the community, Paul loved the community and encouraged his churches to do likewise. At this point, an honest question surfaces: How does one love those in the community who seemingly stand in the way of the spread of the gospel? Paul could love the community he sought to reach with the gospel because he had the love of God in his heart—a love that was intensified by the fact that he knew those in the community well. His love was strengthened further because he also knew the struggles they faced. As Paul became more familiar with those in the community, his love, concern, and affection grew naturally.

In his book, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, Thomas Schreiner has written about the primacy of love in Pauline literature, saying,

> love is the heart and soul of the Pauline ethic: All the exhortations are expressions of love. All the commandments of the law can be summed up in loving one’s neighbor (Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14). Colossians 3:14 (“Above all things is love, which is the bond of perfection”) suggests that love is the supreme virtue and perhaps Paul is saying here that all of the other virtues are bound together with love, finding their origin and foundation in it. The whole Christian life can be summed

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55 In most cases, Paul knew the communities because of the time he had spent there as a church planter. In the case of Rome, however, Paul had not yet traveled to this city prior to writing his letter to the church. Given the influence of the Roman Empire, it is likely that Paul had some degree of understanding about this particular community because of its widespread reputation.
up in the admonition to “walk in love” (Eph 5:2), a love that is patterned after Christ’s love for his people, which is demonstrated in the giving of his life.\textsuperscript{56}

Paul’s instruction to the churches is peppered with admonitions to love (1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 2:8; Eph 4:2; 1 Thess 4:9). In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul specifically wrote about the necessity to live in a spirit of Christian love, saying,

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3).

Paul not only believed that love was a necessity in Christian ministry, but he went as far as to say that love was more significant than other gifts and abilities (1 Cor 13:13).

While 1 Corinthians 13 does not include concrete instructions regarding how the church should express love, an analysis of Paul’s life and letters does reveal ways he displayed love for the community and context he served.

\textbf{Preaching}

Throughout his ministry, Paul devoted a significant amount of time to the task of preaching (Acts 13:16-41; 19:8-9; 20:17-35; 26:1-29). Paul believed the Christian community should express love to the surrounding community by proclaiming the gospel. In his letter to the Romans Paul declared, “I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:15-16). Paul was anxious to preach the gospel because he knew that “in the proclamation of the

\textsuperscript{56}Thomas Schreiner, \textit{Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 313.
gospel God is actively at work in reaching out to the hearts of people. The gospel is God
telling of his love to wayward people. . . . The gospel is God at work. He lives and
breathes through the declaration of his redemptive love for people.”

Paul utilized preaching the gospel to express love to a variety of people within
a given community. First, upon arriving in a city Paul typically entered the synagogue
and preached the gospel to the Jews (Acts 17:2; Rom 1:16). Unfortunately, the Jews
frequently responded to Paul’s loving proclamation of the gospel with disdain (Acts 17:5,

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul boasted of his sufferings for the
gospel by writing, “Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes” (2 Cor 11:24).
David Garland shows that Paul’s punishment nevertheless revealed the depth of Paul’s
love for his fellow Jews by writing:

According to the Mishna, thirty-six sins, including blasphemy, warranted being
cut off from the people without warning (m. Ker. 1:1). But flogging averted both a
harsher punishment at the hands of God and being cut off from the people (Lev
18:29; Num 15:3). The key text reads: ‘When he is scourged then he is thy brother’
(m. Mak 3:15). This principle may help clarify what Paul means when he said, ‘To
the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like
one under the law (thought I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under
the law’ (1 Cor 9:20). He allowed the synagogue to administer punishment on him
‘in order to maintain his Jewish connections.’ Harvey notes that Jews were given
special privileges to settle their disputes in their own courts. If one wanted to stay a
member of the Jewish community, one had to submit to its discipline. For Paul to
submit to this punishment five times testifies not only to his physical stamina but to
his commitment to his people, which he proclaims in Rom 9:2-4: ‘I have great
sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were
cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race,
the people of Israel.’

57Mounce, Romans, 70.

58David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville:
Broadman & Holman, 1999), 497-98, italics in original.
Paul not only suffered for preaching the gospel to the Jews, but he also suffered willingly to ensure the Gentiles could hear. In 2 Corinthians 11:26, Paul added to his list of sufferings that he experienced “dangers from the Gentiles.” The Gentiles “posed serious threats to Paul. They made false charges that Paul was a rabble rouser intent on causing social unrest throughout the world, and they branded him as an enemy of Roman law and order (Acts 14:15; 16:16-24; 19:23-41).”\(^{59}\) If anyone questioned the sincerity of Paul’s preaching ministry, “he could point to the scar tissue on his face and back. He was willing to suffer for Christ and for others because he loved them.”\(^{60}\)

In addition to loving the community through his own preaching ministry, Paul called on others in the church to demonstrate love to their communities by preaching the gospel to them. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul spoke of his love for Jews in the community by writing, “my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation” (10:1). In his commentary on this verse, Mounce notes that “Paul left no doubt about his deep affection for his fellow Israelites. . . . The deep longing of Paul’s heart was that his countrymen experience salvation.”\(^{61}\) He then called on the church in Rome to preach the gospel to them.

In a series of rhetorical questions, Paul asked, “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they

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\(^{59}\)Ibid., 500.

\(^{60}\)Hughes, *Acts*, 221.

\(^{61}\)Mounce, *Romans*, 206-07. Paul’s emphasis on prayer in Rom 10:1 is covered more thoroughly in the next section of this chapter.
are sent?” (10:14-15). Implied in these questions is the expectation that the church would respond by proclaiming the good news to those who had not heard and believed. By doing so, the church would be involved in an act of love for those in its community.

In addition to calling on the church to engage in a loving ministry of gospel proclamation, Paul also called on his son in the faith, Timothy, to do the same in Ephesus. Paul’s charge to Timothy was to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). While the aspect of love is not explicit in this charge, it is certainly implied. As Ralph Earle has made clear in his commentary on this passage, the call to conduct this ministry with “great patience and instruction” suggests that “it must all be done in patience and love” to be profitable. Paul had “prepared Timothy to shoulder the demanding duties of ministry in Ephesus. Because Paul viewed his departure from the scene as near, he passed the baton of the office into the hands of his younger colleague.”

While Paul’s preaching ministry was a demonstration of love to the community, the love he sought to convey was magnified by his knowledge of the community. Paul spoke of his intimate knowledge of the various segments in the community in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, when he wrote,

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win

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62Ralph Earle, _1, 2 Timothy_, in vol. 11 of _The Expositor’s Bible Commentary_, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 411.

63Lea and Griffin, _1, 2 Timothy and Titus_, 242.
the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

In his commentary of the text, Garland has suggested that Paul was a preacher of the changeless gospel who could adapt himself to changing audiences in seeking their ultimate welfare, their salvation. Paul’s understanding of his audience made him a powerful communicator of the gospel.

These examples make it easy to conclude that Paul viewed preaching not simply as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel, but also as an opportunity to express Christian love to a lost and hurting community. Knowing the community allowed Paul to make specific application of his preaching and teaching.

**Praying**

Another way Paul exhibited love for the community was through prayer. Paul not only prayed for the community himself, but he also instructed the church to pray for those in its community. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote,

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all those who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:1-4).

Timothy was ministering in a context (Ephesus) where false teachers were promoting heresy which threatened the health of the church. In chapter 1, Paul explained that Timothy was responsible for putting an end to the spread of false teaching (1:3-11), proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers (1:12-17), and increasing commitment among

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church leaders (1:18-20). The task with which Timothy had been charged was a response to factors which threatened the church in Ephesus. The question becomes, “How would Timothy accomplish this task? Paul’s emphasis was that Timothy lead his hearers to pray.”

Paul used four words for prayer in 1 Timothy 2:1: “Entreaties,” “prayers,” “petitions,” and “thanksgivings.” It has been suggested that, The four words for prayer may be synonyms, repeated to give emphasis to the request, or, more likely, they may represent distinguishable nuances that Paul wanted to specify. . . . These four terms delineate aspects of what should mark prayers: δεήσεις, making requests for specific needs; προσευχάς, bringing those in view before God; ἐντεύξεις, appealing boldly on their behalf; and εὐχαριστίας, thankfulness for them.

Paul did not instruct churches to pray only in a generic way for those in their community. He instead encouraged his churches to pray with specificity, not unlike the “smart bomb praying” that Bob Beckett has advocated in his book, Commitment to Conquer. Though Paul would not have followed Beckett’s thinking regarding strategic level intercession and spiritual warfare, Beckett’s realization of the need for his own church to pray with greater clarity is nevertheless informative:

If we could add the element of accurate intercession to the prayer life of our church, I was convinced our community would begin to improve. . . . An understanding of ‘smart bomb praying’—prayers armed with warheads of specific information regarding issues of darkness within our community—moved us into strategic-level intercession, delivering smart bomb prayers on behalf of a geographical location (in our case, Hemet). And as The Dwelling Place moved

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65Ibid.


toward accurate, strategic-level praying, we began to find out what really—and I mean really—was going on in our city.68

Beckett’s observation is yet another example of how important knowledge of the community can be in revitalization ministry. Knowledge of the community enables a church to pray more effectively, while also bringing to light community realities that may demand a ministry response.

One example where Paul encouraged his churches to pray more specifically is in his instruction to pray “for kings and all who are in authority” (1 Tim 2:2) Knight has suggested that Paul’s solicitation for believers to pray for civil authorities had a practical and significant purpose—a purpose that has to do with life itself, both proximate and ultimate.69 Paul wanted to see all men, authority figures included, experience salvation and godly living, which he hoped would facilitate the spread of the gospel.

While this idea is implicitly mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Paul stated it more explicitly in Romans 10:1 reviewed earlier: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.” Paul spoke pointedly about Israel’s failure to attain righteousness,

but not censoriously. He feels for his countrymen. He knows their plight because their condition was his own condition prior to his conversion. His desire for their salvation is reflected in his going to the Jews first (Acts 13:46; 18:5; 6; cf. Rom 1:16) but also in praying to God on their behalf. His preaching may be earnest, but it alone cannot convert. God must move in their hearts.70

68Ibid., 34-35, italics in original.

69Knight, The Pastoral Epistles, 116.

70Everett Harrison, Romans, in vol. 10 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 110.
Paul’s earnest preaching and devotion to prayer for the salvation of the Israelites revealed a genuine heart that longed to see salvation come to the Jews. The love that drove him to suffer immensely for preaching the gospel (2 Cor 11:16-28) is the same love that drove him to his knees in prayer for their salvation.

Paul’s love for the community is further exemplified by his request of others to pray for him as he conducted his ministry. Those in Paul’s immediate community would have consisted of prison mates, guards, and others associated with the prison system of his day (6:20). In both Ephesians 6:19-20 and Colossians 4:3-4, Paul asked believers to pray for him as he proclaimed the mystery of the gospel of Christ to those in his community. Paul asked that believers pray for God to give him opportunity, the right words, and the right tone as he communicated the gospel (Eph 6:19-20; Col 4:3-4).

Hendriksen makes this point well:

[Paul] probably had in mind some or all of the following particulars: a. Pray that I may speak clearly (‘that I may make it clear’), b. boldly, that is, without fear or restraint (‘telling all,’ see Eph 6:19, ἐν παρρησίᾳ), c. yet also graciously (see the context, Col 4:6a), and d. wisely, so that I may know exactly what approach to use when questioned by groups or individuals of various backgrounds: visitors who come to see me in prison, soldiers, who guard me, and the Roman authorities before whom I may be summoned.\(^7\)

Paul’s request for prayer reveals his love for the community in which he found himself. His desire for their salvation was so real that he asked believers to pray that his communication skills did not become a barrier that would prevent those he interacted with from understanding the gospel. Moreover, he wanted courage to keep preaching Christ—the very thing for which he had been imprisoned in the first place. Paul clearly

\(^7\)Hendriksen, Colossians, 181-82, italics in original.
did not resent those who guarded him or conducted his trial. Instead, he loved them and asked others to pray for him as he sought to lead them to faith in Christ.

For example, in his letter to the Colossians Paul wrote, “devote yourself to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Col 4:2). Bromiley has argued that the best translation for the term γρηγορέω, commonly translated as “keeping alert” is better translated as “‘to watch,’ . . . ‘to keep zealous watch over.’” More specifically, in the immediate context of Colossians 4:2 the term encourages believers to keep watch out of “concern for the salvation of the community.” The instruction to pray with a sense of alertness for the salvation of others reveals not only the importance of knowing the community, but also Paul’s expectation for the church to express love for the community.

Immediately after asking believers in Ephesus to pray for his specific needs, Paul stated, “But that you may also know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you” (Eph 6:21). The fact that Paul felt the need to inform the Ephesian believers of his circumstances is itself an indicator that he believed that understanding context enabled one to pray more effectively.

**Conclusion**

Throughout his ministry, Paul consistently dealt with the reality of contextual issues. Instead of using a template in his advisory role with churches, Paul sought to gain a thorough understanding of the context in which the church was seeking to minister.

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That in-depth understanding enabled Paul to offer instruction that both protected his churches and equipped them with ability to contextualize the gospel. By understanding the context, Paul was able to offer instruction regarding the health of the local church.

In addition to understanding contextual issues of his day, Paul also believed in the importance of demonstrating love to the community. His ministry was by no means marked by detachment. Instead, Paul longed to see those in the community come to faith in Christ. His knowledge of the community and his love for the people drove him to preach and pray with a sense of urgency and specificity.

As revitalization agents and church leaders today seek to improve the health of struggling churches, they must not overlook contextual factors. Like Paul, they must thoroughly understand their context and genuinely love their communities. As attention to contextual factors increases, ministry to hurting churches will be stronger.
CHAPTER 4

PAUL’S STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Introduction

The second factors which McGavran believed affected the growth and health of the local church were institutional factors. Unlike contextual factors, which are commonly understood as external factors, institutional factors are internal factors which “have to do with the structure of the institution. [For example], how does the church function? What traditions does it embrace?”1 Consequently, the church can control institutional factors because they are the direct result of decisions that church and denominational leaders make.

For example, at least three mainline denominations in the United States experienced a significant numerical decline in membership from 1965-1990.2 McGavran attributed this decline “at least to a significant degree, to a national institutional factor: in the mid-1960s their national leaders decided to prioritize social ministries over

1Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City & the People of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 258.

evangelism and church planting.” Institutional factors, then, have a type of cause and effect relationship with church health. As denominational and church leaders make decisions that affect the internal workings of congregations, a church may improve or deteriorate in health.

A careful examination of Pauline literature will reveal Paul’s concern regarding institutional factors within the church. Polhill has described Paul as,

one who had a daily concern for all his churches (2 Cor 11:28). Paul’s pastoral concerns shine through in all his epistles, from the earliest to the latest. To the Thessalonians, who worried over the deaths of fellow Christians, Paul provided pastoral care, assuring them of the certainty of the resurrection. With a pastor’s insight, he realized the threat of disunity in the Philippian congregation and urged them to be more selfless and concerned for one another in the example of Christ. . . . In the pastorals, Paul was likewise concerned with special problems that had arisen in the churches—the image and impact of the church on the outside community and the problems of individual groups within the church, such as the widows. These were all, of course, pastoral concerns. Even Paul’s socially conservative stance in Philemon probably derived ultimately from his concern for the image and witness of the church in the larger community. 4

The purpose of this chapter is to extrapolate Paul’s strategy for understanding and confronting institutional factors that affected the health of the churches with whom he worked. This chapter will make two important points about Paul’s approach to institutional factors. First, evidence from Paul’s writings will show that Paul had a thorough understanding of the institutions, or churches, which he advised. That in-depth understanding guided Paul as he offered instruction throughout his revitalization ministry.

Second, this study will show that Paul’s love for the churches he advised

3 Donald McGavran, Understanding Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

4 John Polhill, Paul & His Letters (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 441.
played a significant part in his work to improve the health of the institution. At times, Paul had to address issues that were not easy for him to address, nor were they easy for the church to hear. His love for the church, however, prompted him to confront issues head on, regardless of the difficulty.

Principle 1: Know the Church

One aspect of Paul’s revitalization ministry that strengthened his work was his knowledge of the church. In his work with churches, Paul refrained from reproducing the same answers for each church as he instructed them in matters of church health. His advice to each church was specific because each church had unique issues that affected their overall health.

Paul used a variety of methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the churches he advised. He acquired knowledge by spending time with the church, often as their founding pastor (Acts 16:14-15, 40; 17:1-4; 18:1-11; 19:1-10), and by meeting with church representatives (1 Cor 1:11; 2 Cor 8:23) who explained institutional dynamics that influenced the church’s effectiveness. The knowledge Paul acquired through these methods enabled him to speak specifically to institutional issues that affected the church’s health.

Know the Level of Unity in the Church

One institutional factor Paul addressed in his letters to churches was the issue of unity. Paul knew that unity was not beyond the scope of the church’s control, and he instructed them to be diligent in their attempts “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Additionally, he would not have written to the church in
Corinth, “I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10) had he not known that the church could decide whether to be healthy.

Unfortunately, the need to speak to the threat of disunity was so common that Paul become all too familiar with this issue. Wayne Grudem has written a thorough summary which reveals just how frequently this issue emerged in the churches Paul advised:

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are ‘called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours’ (1 Cor 1:2). . . . He encourages the Philippians, ‘complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind’ (Phil 2:2). He tells the Ephesians that Christians are to be ‘eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph 4:3), and that the Lord gives gifts to the church ‘for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness [sic] of Christ’ (Eph 4:12-13). Paul can command the church to live in unity because there already is an actual spiritual unity in Christ which exists among genuine believers. He says, ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Eph 4:4-6). And though the body of Christ consists of many members, those members are all ‘one body’ (1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-26).5

Even though Paul addressed the issue of unity many times, his words of direction were not always the same. A careful study of Paul’s instruction on this institutional issue reveals that Paul understood the nuances of the struggle to achieve unity in any particular church to which he wrote. A review of the letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians will help to make this point.

5Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 876, italics in original.
Paul wrote to both the church in Corinth (1 Cor 8:1-11:1) and the church in Rome (Rom 14:1-15:13) about potential division over the ethics of eating unclean food. Thomas Schreiner has acknowledged that, “Some scholars are convinced that 1 Corinthians 8:10-11:1 and Romans 14:1-15:13 address the same basic situation, suggesting that in Romans Paul summarizes and rewrites the exhortations in 1 Corinthians 8-10.”6 A thorough review of the two texts, however, reveals that, despite the remarkable similarities between the two texts, it is quite likely that Paul addresses different situations in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15. For example, food offered to idols takes center stage in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19, 28), but the matter of idols is never even raised in Romans. The propriety of abstaining from meat and wine for the sake of others emerges as an issue in Romans (14:2, 21), whereas this matter is not broached in 1 Corinthians.7

Schreiner’s comments demonstrate that Paul was addressing the same basic issue in both churches—that is, wisely using liberty in Christ to preserve unity of the body and the witness of younger believers—but was so specific in his instruction that he included only details applicable to the church addressed. The specificity of his instruction reveals just how familiar Paul had become with the institutional issue in each congregation.

In Romans 14:1-15:13, Paul offered a number of insights designed to protect the unity of the church. While he declared that the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking, but about righteousness and peace and joy in the spirit (14:17), his instructions did not end there. Instead of dismissing the issue, Paul recognized that a

6Thomas Schreiner, Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 344.

7Ibid., 345. Schreiner elaborates much more extensively as he makes his case that Paul was addressing different situations in Rome and Corinth. For the sake of space, however, the abbreviated quotation was used to make the point.
potential for division existed over participation in ceremonial meals. In an attempt to promote unity among the believers in Rome, Paul reminded the Romans that, “Eating and drinking can be an instance of walking in love, or not walking in love (Rom 14:15-16)—as well as of living or not living in peace with others (Rom 14:19), or of edifying or not edifying the other (Rom 14:19).”8 Paul wanted these believers to value the needs of others more than they valued the exercise of Christian liberties; that is, he wanted them to have a mindset that would foster unity in the church.

The church in Corinth was divided over more issues than the ethics of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. Throughout his letter, Paul consistently returned to the theme of unity. In 1:10, he wrote, “I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.” In 6:1-11, Paul condemned the divisions within the church which were so severe that the Corinthians had taken the matter into a court of law. Finally, in chapters 12-14 Paul confronted the church about a division regarding the superiority of spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church was divided, arguing, and arrogant—all that could be corrected if they chose to do so.

In addition to the issues in Corinth, Paul also dealt with the threat of racial division in Ephesus. In their book, An Introduction to the New Testament, D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris have suggested that one of the purposes of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was to address “a possible tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians”9


and to promote unity within that congregation. In his letter to the Ephesian believers, Paul exults in the fact that Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens with Israel and members of God’s household. The mystery revealed to him is that Gentiles are ‘fellow heirs and members of the same body [syssōma] and fellow sharers of the promise through the gospel’ (Eph 3:6). The unity of the body of Christ, both Jews and Gentiles together, is the major theme in Ephesians 2:11-3:13.¹⁰

Paul likely felt compelled to address this institutional issue after hearing from his son in the faith, Timothy, who had stayed in Ephesus to minister to the church after Paul departed for Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3).

Paul not only made such claims in an attempt to promote unity, but he also acted to confront situations where racial divisions existed. In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul reported that he opposed Peter to his face because Peter had removed himself from the Gentile Christians and had begun eating only with Jewish Christians. There was a time when Peter was happy to share a meal with Gentile Christians, but now he had begun to practise [sic] Jewish-style social separation. This in effect amounted to saying to Gentile Christians, ‘Unless you conform to the Jewish way of life we cannot have social relations with you.’ This was practically compelling them to ‘judaize’. Some Jewish Christians might have complained that they were being compelled to ‘hellenize’ (against their most poignant ancestral traditions) in order to maintain table-fellowship with Gentile Christians. Cephas, however, could not make this complaint: he ‘helenized’ voluntarily, until the messengers from James came. Paul’s mature policy, where there were conflicting convictions of this kind, was that one side should consider the other, and especially that the stronger should consider the weaker, in a spirit of Christian charity (Rom. 14:1ff.), but anything that smacked of compulsion was abhorrent to him.¹¹

While Paul’s confrontation with Peter may have been difficult at the time, it was not an issue from which he was willing to back down. Paul knew that the health of

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the church and the advance of the gospel across racial lines required unity among all believers. Indeed, he expressed this truth this way: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ” (3:28).

The significance of this study on unity is not just the issue itself, but also Paul’s familiarity with the subject. Paul’s personal confrontation with Peter, his own calling and work among the Jews and Gentiles, and the conversations he had with Chloe’s people and Timothy served to enlighten Paul on this institutional factor that threatened the health of the church and the spread of the gospel. He simply knew the situation and was thus prepared to speak to it. The church would need to decide—as is the case with other institutional factors—how to respond to the apostle’s teaching.

As revitalization agents work with churches today, the institutional factor of unity must be addressed. Unfortunately, Christians today are often too quick to abandon their church, organization, small group, friend, or spouse when the going gets tough. People would rather split than go through the frustrations of working through the problems. This tendency results in shallow relationships, which in turn result in minimal depth to the fruit of their labors. In fact, learning to pay the price of commitment is a key to developing deep fruit in ministry anywhere in the world.¹²

Unhealthy churches must be especially concerned with unity. Revitalization agents must push church leaders to candidly discuss potentially divisive issues and rally those in the church in search for a solution.

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¹²Ajith Fernando, Jesus Driven Ministry (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 24.
Know the Strategy for Ministry in the Church

In addition to unity, Paul also exhibited a thorough understanding of institutional factors related to ministry. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul offered instruction on the topic of ministry to every level of the organization when he wrote, “And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (4:11-12).

From top to bottom, Paul taught that every member in the church had been or could be equipped for the work of service. Polhill has shown that the word translated as service “is the word for ministry (diakonia). All the members of the body of Christ are to do the work of ministry. The church leaders are equippers. The entire body of Christ are the ministers. When all work together, the church progresses toward its goal of full maturity.”

Greater degrees of health and effectiveness can be achieved as church leaders implement Paul’s instruction and equip the saints.

Paul not only emphasized the importance of member involvement in ministry in Ephesians 4, but he also used his most common metaphor for the church, “the body,” in both the preceding text and in 1 Corinthians 12 (another text that speaks of members in ministry; see also Rom 12:4-5; Col 1:18; 2:19). This metaphor alludes to a correlation between ministry involvement and the health of the church. In order for a body to be healthy, it must be characterized by diversity (1 Cor 12:14), for bodies are made up of many members. . . . Indeed, if the body were composed of only one member it would be grotesque. It would be a monstrosity if the body were a giant eye or a giant ear (1 Cor 12:17).

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Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*, 369, italics in original.
The variety of the body is ‘appointed’ (*etheto*) and determined by God (1 Cor 12:18). The diversity of the church is not contrary to his will but is an expression of it… The various parts of the body are needed for the body to function properly (1 Cor 12:22-24), and God has constituted the body as a unified whole (1 Cor 12:24-27).\(^\text{14}\)

Paul knew from experience the importance of calling out and equipping believers for ministry. He personally selected Timothy for his ministry team, according to Acts 16:3; nevertheless, as Gene Getz has argued from his study of Christian leadership throughout Acts, the key factor in Paul’s selection of Timothy was that “‘the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him’ (Acts 16:2). It would not be surprising that this was also an important factor in selecting and appointing elders in these cities in the first place.”\(^\text{15}\) Paul’s willingness to take time to learn about believers from other leaders no doubt contributed to his credibility as a spokesman on the issue.

Paul’s church planting pattern, moreover, was to plant and then depart for new regions where Christ was not known. With an undetermined, yet inevitable, departure date in mind, Paul had to equip and entrust others with the work he had started. Thus, Paul entrusted Timothy with the work in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3), and he “left Titus in Crete to exercise pastoral supervision over the churches there (Titus 1:5).”\(^\text{16}\) In order for Paul’s churches to remain healthy after his departure, others would be prepared to carry on the work. Paul’s experience enabled him to speak with credibility to church leaders because he was an equipper himself. Those experiences provided Paul with insight and knowledge that he could use as he advised churches on the institutional issue of ministry.

\(^{14}\)Schreiner, *Paul*, 336, italics in original.


As revitalization agents and church leaders work to improve the health of the church, the institutional factor of ministry must not be overlooked. Church leaders consistently make decisions regarding to whom the church will minister—church members or those in the community, people in near proximity to the church, and/or people overseas. Additionally, church leaders determine what types of financial and personnel will be allocated to these ministry efforts. These internally-made decisions affect the health and effectiveness of the local church and must be made with wisdom.

**Know the Morality of the Church**

Another institutional issue Paul frequently addressed with churches was the issue of morality. Paul consistently implored churches to walk in a manner worthy of the calling they had received in Christ (Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12). In his letter to the Philippians, he commanded them to, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (2:14-15). Paul’s purpose in writing exhortations like this one was to protect the credibility of the church and the gospel they proclaimed. Paul “wants his readers to be God’s perfect children as they live and witness in the midst of the entire unbelieving world—a world that stands under divine judgment.”

Scholars have referred to Pauline exhortations as “paraenetic” in style. “Paraenetic” is a derivative of the technical term paraenesis which was used to describe

“traditional moral exhortation concerned with practical issues of living.”

For Paul, The epistolary paraenesis was the sort of teaching he shared with his congregations when present with them. The amount of space Paul devoted to ethical instruction in his letters is testimony to the importance he placed on the moral aspect of the Christian life. . . . Usually this kind of moral teaching is found toward the end of Paul’s epistles (Rom 12:1-15:13; Gal 5:1-6:10; 1 Thess 4:1-5:22; Col 3:1-4:6). It is woven throughout Philippians, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians.

Found in all of Paul’s letters except Philemon, two types of paraenesis can be found in Paul’s letters: specific and general. Specific paraenesis was moral instruction Paul gave to a church because of a unique situation within that particular congregation. Schreiner believes, “This is clearly the case in Colossians 2 and much of 1 Corinthians.”

For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul specifically reminded the church that their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit (6:19). The moral instruction surrounding that particular truth was likely given to the Corinthians because of sexual immorality in that congregation. In the previous chapter, Paul had just disclosed some of their sexual misconduct by writing, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife” (1 Cor 5:1).

Schreiner has suggested that some of the Corinthians may have excused their behavior by arguing, “‘all things are lawful’ (1 Cor 6:12). Perhaps they even drew a parallel between hunger and sexual desire (1 Cor 6:13), arguing either that both desires

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19 Ibid.

20 Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 125.

21 Thomas Schreiner, Interpreting the Pauline Epistles (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 38.
should be satisfied whenever they arise or that the body is of no consequence, so it does not matter what we do.”

Schreiner’s suggestions reveal that Paul was addressing not only a specific case of immorality, but also rationalizations for their behavior. Dealing with a specific sin, as well as specific attempts to rationalize that sin, required an intentional, direct set of moral instructions.

In addition to specific paraenesis, Paul’s letters also contained more general paraenesis. General paraenesis is moral instruction which is good for all churches, in any location, at any time. It is not an attempt to address a particular issue, but is instead exhortation to promote holiness and godliness. For example,

The Pauline household codes are probably also general paraenesis (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1), for the directives found there do not seem to counter any problem in the churches. What is relevant for the topic at hand is that these admonitions demonstrate that all Christians, no matter how godly, need specific instructions both on what to avoid and on what to pursue in the Christian life.

Polhill has observed that “Paul’s paraenesis is traditional moral instruction, drawn from the Old Testament, the teachings of Jesus, and the best moral traditions of the day.” It is easy to see that the Old Testament greatly influenced Paul’s paraenesis. In Acts 22:3, Paul declared that he had been, “educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers.” The prestigious education Paul received from the respected rabbi, Gamaliel, no doubt made him an expert on the Old Testament law. Additionally, Paul’s experience as a Pharisee contributed to his knowledge of the law (Phil 3:5). Paul’s

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22Schreiner, Paul, 308.

23Ibid., 313.

24Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 125.
extensive discussions on the Old Testament law in passages such as Romans 8:1-8 and Galatians 3:15-24 reveal just how familiar he was with this material.

What is more difficult to determine is how Paul’s paraenesis could have been influenced by the teachings of Jesus, especially considering that Paul had no contact with Jesus except his conversion experience on the Damascus road. One might speculate that Paul learned a great deal from those who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry and had been appointed as apostles before him.

In his letter to the Galatians, however, Paul acknowledged that after his conversion, “I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away to Arabia” (1:16-17).

Timothy George has argued in his commentary on Galatians that Paul used his trip to Arabia to spend extensive time alone with God, a time for prayer and searching the Scriptures, a coming apart to be prepared for being sent back forth. . . . Through such study and meditation Paul too came to know Christ more fully—in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings—and thus to be prepared more completely for the awesome task for which he had been set apart, called, and commissioned.25

Other scholars affirm George’s conclusion regarding the purpose of Paul’s trip to Arabia. For example, Carson, Moo, and Morris have noted,

Some think that Paul spent his time in Arabia meditating and hammering out his theology, and it is likely considering the drastic change in perspective occasioned by his Damascus-road experience, that some of his time was so spent. But it is unlikely that this was simply a period of retreat. Paul’s later difficulties with the king of the

25 Timothy George, Galatians, The New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 125. Hendriksen adds to George’s conclusion by showing that “withdrawing to Arabia for rest, prayer, and meditation was exactly what Paul needed, so that his mind, violently shaken, would have time and opportunity to ponder the implications of the words which the Lord had spoken to him at the moment of his unforgettable experience.” William Hendriksen, Galatians, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 56.
Nabataeans, Aretas, suggests strongly that he was engaged in active ministry during this time (2 Cor 11:32).26

This insight suggests that Paul spent his time in Arabia working out his understanding of Christ in both theory and in practice.

In addition to the insights gained during his time in Arabia, three years later Paul met with the apostle James, brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19). During that encounter, it is quite possible that Jesus was the subject of their conversation. Bruce, for example, has argued that Galatians 1:18f provides evidence of an occasion where Paul could hear firsthand from Peter and James about the details of Jesus’ resurrection. Specifically, he suggests that “it was during Paul’s present visit to Jerusalem that he learned of the risen Lord’s appearance to Cephas, it was no doubt during the same visit that he learned of his subsequent (ἕως ταύτα) appearance to James, while he himself would be able to add his personal testimony: ‘Last of all . . . he appeared also to me’ (1 Cor.15:8).”27

Such an occasion afforded Paul the opportunity to learn about the resurrection, as well as the teachings of Jesus—which surely influenced Paul’s instruction on morality. Indeed, he was so mature in his knowledge and practice of morality that, “Often in the ethical sections of his letters, Paul presented himself as a model to be emulated.”28 His knowledge, coupled with his own integrity, made him a credible spokesman who could advise churches on this institutional issue.

As church leaders and revitalization agents work on improving the health of the church today, the institutional factor of morality cannot be overlooked. Leaders need


27Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians, 100, italics in original.
to be aware of immorality that may tarnish the church’s reputation. If the old adage is true and actions do speak louder than words, a member’s behavior in the community may say more about the church and its message than anything the pastor may say in the context of a worship service. For this reason, revitalization agents must work with church leaders to develop an effective means of discipleship that can be used to bring deeds of darkness into the light. By doing so, the church can obtain greater degrees of holiness and strength.

**Know the Leadership in the Church**

Another institutional factor which has always been a key component in the health and effectiveness of the local church is leadership. C. Peter Wagner, a former leader in the Church Growth Movement, observed that, “In America, the primary catalytic factor for growth in a local church is the pastor. In every growing, dynamic church I have studied, I have found a key person who God is using to make it happen.”\(^29\) In his book, *Your Church Can Grow*, Wagner further declared that the number one vital sign of a healthy church “is a pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth.”\(^30\)

Wagner’s now dated conclusion has nevertheless been affirmed more recently by Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer. In their book, *Transformational Church*, they reported, “As we worked through the research, we continually saw the importance of godly and vibrant leadership. Whether a strong senior leader, elder team, or staff team, vibrant

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\(^{28}\) Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*, 125.

\(^{29}\) C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 60.
leaders were always present in TCs.”

If leadership is so critical, the effective revitalization agent must consider the level of leadership in a local church.

In both his ministry as a church planter and in his subsequent work as a guardian of church health, Paul gave careful attention to the institutional issue of leadership. Getz has noted that shortly “after starting churches in four significant cities in southern Galatia Paul and Barnabas, ‘returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch [of Pisidia]’ (Acts 14:21) to establish these new believers in their faith.”

This task was accomplished, in part, when Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). These newly appointed elders provided leadership so Paul and Barnabas could continue preaching the gospel where Christ was not yet known.

As Paul instructed the church in matters of leadership, he indicated that a healthy church should appoint leaders to two distinct offices, the office of elder and the office of deacon. Akin has argued, in fact, that “there were two and only two offices within each congregation: pastors (elders or bishops) and deacons (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-13).” Utilizing qualified men in each office enhances the leadership capacity of the church and contributes to its health.

Perhaps Paul’s most extensive instruction on leadership is in the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus. Polhill has observed that, “In the Pastoral Epistles Paul

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30 Ibid., 63.
31 Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, Transformational Church (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 73.
32 Getz, Elders and Leaders, 65.
recommended to Timothy and Titus a pattern which Acts shows he regularly followed—
establishing good leadership over all the churches.”

One of Paul’s purposes in writing about leadership in the Pastoral Epistles was to educate his colleagues on the matter of leadership qualifications for local church ministry (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Grudem has noted that in both letters, “When Paul lists the qualifications for elders, it is significant that he combines requirements concerning character traits and heart attitudes with requirements that cannot be fulfilled in a short time but will only become evident over a period of several years of faithful Christian living.” Grudem’s observation reveals the cautionary nature of Paul’s instruction on the appointment of church leaders. Timothy and Titus were to take this responsibility seriously and be slow to appoint men to these offices. If Paul’s instructions were ignored, unqualified men in positions of leadership could cause irreparable damage to the health of the church.

It is also worth noting that Paul wrote to the Christian leaders in Ephesus (Timothy) and Crete (Titus) and challenged them to be an example that others could follow. In order to accomplish this task, Paul advised them to follow his own example, as he followed Christ (2 Tim 3:10-11). Grudem makes the point that all Christian leaders should strive to be like Paul in this regard—conducting their lives in such a way that others could follow:

Just as Paul could say, ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 2 Tim 3:10-11), and just as he could command Timothy to ‘set the believers an

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34 Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 441.

35 Grudem, Systematic Theology, 916.
example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity’ (1 Tim 4:12), and just as he could tell Titus, ‘Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured’ (Titus 2:7), so the pattern is to be continued in the lives of all church leaders today. It is not optional that their lives be examples for others to follow; it is a requirement.36

Paul understood this responsibility. Throughout his ministry, he provided leadership to men like Timothy, Titus, and others. As leaders themselves, Timothy and Titus were more likely to listen to and follow Paul’s instruction because they knew he spoke from experience. Paul was not an advisor who could discuss leadership in theory only. He knew the real struggles of church leadership because he had been a church leader himself. That personal experience gave him credibility as he addressed leadership issues in the church.

Those interested in church health must give the issue of leadership the attention it demands. Revitalization agents, in particular, must push church leaders to hold fast to Paul’s instruction on leadership, especially in churches where leadership is absent. A natural temptation for struggling churches is to place faithful people into positions of leadership who are not biblically qualified or adequately trained. In cases like these, the revitalization agent must remind church leaders of God’s perfect plan regarding leadership in the church and then guide church leaders to leadership development resources for future training.

**Know the Theology of the Church**

Another institutional factor which influences the health and effectiveness of the church is theology. Theology is of great significance to the local church for many

36Ibid., italics in original.
reasons. First, maintaining a biblical theology is necessary in order to protect the church from embracing heretical teaching. For example, Millard Erickson has drawn attention to the fact that,

Theology is needful because of the large number of alternatives and challenges abroad at the present time. Secular alternatives abound, including the humanism that makes the human being the highest object of value, and the scientific method that seeks truth without recourse to revelation from a divine human being. Other religions now compete with Christianity, even in once supposedly secure Western civilization. Not merely automobiles, electronic devices, and cameras are exported to the United States from the East. Eastern religion is now also challenging the once virtually exclusive domain of Christianity. Islam is growing rapidly in the United States, especially among African American males. Numerous quasi-religions also make their appeal. Countless psychological self-help systems are advocated. Cults are not restricted to the big-name varieties (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism). Numerous groups, some of which practice virtual brain-washing and mind control, now attract individuals who desire an alternative to conventional Christianity. Finally, many varieties of teaching, some mutually contradictory, exist within Christianity.\(^{37}\)

This threat to biblical theology is real, but it is not new. In his letter to the Romans, Paul put the church on alert and instructed them to watch out for false teachers who threaten the health of the church:

“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom 16:17-18).

Likewise in his farewell to the Ephesians. Paul warned with a sense of expectation that after his departure, “savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30; see also 2 Cor 11:13-15).

In order for the church to survive the real threats of heretical teaching “The people of God must be equipped to distinguish truth from error, good theology from bad theology.”\(^{38}\) It is for this reason that Paul provided his readers with a theological education in the letters that he wrote.

Second, maintaining a biblical theology is necessary in order for the church to fulfill its mission. The church has been entrusted with the task of making disciples of all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded” (Matt 28:19-20). At a minimum, the teaching component of this task cannot be accomplished apart from sound biblical theology. For this reason, “it is crucial to wed doctrine and life—to recognize the unity of faith and practice. The Apostle Paul was exemplary in this manner. He was a great theologian as well as a great missionary. He saw no dichotomy between the theology of the church and the mission of the church.”\(^{39}\)

Third, maintaining a biblical theology is necessary in order for the church to accurately speak to cultural issues of the day. From ancient Israel to contemporary Christianity, God’s people have been His representatives in the world (Exod 19:5-6). Consequently, they have been entrusted with the responsibility of representing His character and His will to the community around them. The need for sound theology becomes clear when one realizes that “Each generation asks particular questions that are often characterized by unique concerns. . . . It is the task of every theologian to


\(^{39}\)Ibid.
demonstrate the relevance of the Bible for the contemporary audience.\textsuperscript{40}

Paul’s expertise as a theologian is evident in the letters he wrote, but perhaps his most mature theology is found in Romans. Some scholars believe Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome while he was in Corinth toward the end of his third missionary journey.\textsuperscript{41} By this time Paul’s theology was, in all likelihood, thoroughly developed at this ending point of his ministry career.

Paul’s purpose in writing to believers in Rome may also explain why he went to such lengths to provide such a mature explanation of his theology. While Paul may have had more than one reason for writing to the Romans, it is difficult to deny that a primary purpose of his letter was to defend the gospel he preached (Rom 1:15-17). J. D. G. Dunn, for example, has argued that,

The implication of such passages as Romans 1:16; 3:8 and 9:1-2, not to mention the repeated recourse to diatribe style, is that Paul felt himself and his understanding of the gospel under attack and needing to be justified. Hence the obvious conclusion has been drawn that the letter functions as Paul’s apology for his gospel, and therefore also as a self-apologia, since his whole life’s-work was bound up with the gospel he preached.\textsuperscript{42}

The end result of this thoroughly theological defense is the book of Romans, which “satisfies the craving of the human spirit for a comprehensive exposition of the great

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., viii.


\textsuperscript{42}J. D. G. Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” in \textit{Dictionary of Paul and His Letters}, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 840. In addition to the apologetic purpose, Dunn also notes that other purposes have received support from scholars. Specifically, he discusses the missionary purpose that focuses on Paul desire to evangelize Spain, as well as the pastoral purpose which argues for support from Paul’s exhortations toward church health.
truths of salvation set out in logical fashion, supported and illuminated by OT Scripture.”

Evidence for understanding Paul as a theologian extends well beyond the book of Romans. After years of Pauline studies, Polhill has concluded that,

Many would describe Paul as being primarily a theologian. They would point to such things as his profound discussion of revelation and reason in 1 Corinthians, his contrast of divine with human wisdom. They might note the exalted Christology of Colossians or the treatment of freedom in the Galatian epistle. Above all, they would point to Paul’s analysis of human sin and divine righteousness in Romans. Through the centuries, Paul has been the seminal theologian for the Christian church with his powerful life-changing influence on such giants as Augustine and Luther.  

Revitalization agents today must be intentional about discussing theology with the churches they advise. In fact, they must be theologians themselves. Avoiding theological issues communicates that no correlation exists between sound biblical theology and church health. Such was not the view of Paul. As Paul consulted with struggling churches, he issued advice from a coherent theological worldview. Paul applied his theological worldview to the situations which arose. His letters would not be so profound if he were merely a pragmatist reacting to the situations occurring in the churches. The profundity of his thought reveals itself in the pastoral application of his theology to concrete situations. . . . Naturally we do not have enough information in these letters to determine Paul’s view on every theological issue, but there is enough information to provide the reader with a very full-blooded picture of Paul’s theology.  

Revitalization agents must also approach their work from a clear biblical worldview, following the example of the apostle Paul. Thus, it is easy to see how Paul was esteemed among churches as a credible spokesman on the issue of theology.

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43Everett Harrison, Romans, in vol. 10 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 7.  
44Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 441, italics in original.  
45Schreiner, Interpreting the Pauline Epistles, 136.
Summary

The issues of unity, ministry, morality, leadership, and theology are only examples of some of the institutional factors Paul addressed as he advised churches. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list of institutional factors which can be found throughout Pauline literature. Instead, these examples reveal the necessity of understanding the church before offering advice to the church. As Paul showed, that knowledge contributes to the effectiveness of a revitalization agent as he works with churches to address their health.

Principle 2: Love the Church

Paul’s revitalization ministry was marked not only by an in-depth understanding of institutional factors which affected the health of the church, but also love for the church. Love, for Paul, was a critical component of his revitalization ministry. His genuine love and concern for the church, as well as the communities he sought to reach with the gospel prevented him from giving up on the church as he continuously addressed the list of institutional issues with many congregations. Paul’s letters reveal a great deal about the affection he felt for the churches he advised and the means by which he expressed his affection.

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46Mark Dever, *Twelve Challenges Churches Face* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008). As the title suggests, Dever has identified twelve challenges that churches commonly face and must overcome in order to be a healthy church. His study is built primarily upon Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. While Dever does not refer to these challenges as institutional factors, most of these issues can be labeled as such according to the definition provided in this chapter. Dever’s list includes such issues as: forgetfulness, division, impostors, sin, asceticism, disobedience, legalism, autonomy, thoughtlessness, selfishness, death, and decline. Additionally, the administration of the ordinances of the church as well as the exercise of church discipline may also be considered institutional issues Paul addressed in his letters.
Communicate Love for the Church

This dissertation has already established that Paul communicated with churches in a variety of ways. He used emissaries, made personal visits, and communicated via letters. In Paul’s day there were many different types of Greek letters, but one of the more common types was, the epistle of friendship. Although none of Paul’s letters could be typed exclusively as a friendship letter, there are individual passages within his letters which resemble the genre. For example, when in Philippians he spoke of “longing” for them (1:7-8) and when he bade them to join him in his feelings of joy (2:17-18), he was employing phrases common to the friendship letter.47

In addition to glimpses of this particular genre in Paul’s letters, other evidences of Paul’s love for the church are apparent in the contents of his letters. For example, when wrestling with the question of why Paul longed to visit the church in Rome, Hendriksen points to internal textual evidence to conclude, “He writes to the Romans because he loves them. They are his friends ‘in Christ,’ and by means of this letter he imparts his love to them, praises them (1:8), informs them about his constant prayers for them (1:9), asks them to pray for him (15:30), and informs them about his traveling plans (1:10-12; 15:24f).”48

Sadly, the personal content in Paul’s letters is too often disregarded as merely introductory material that contains little significant insight. Hendriksen makes this point well by writing about Romans:

this deeply personal reason (desire for fellowship, etc.), a reason clearly brought out by the apostle himself, is often overlooked. At times the emphasis is placed entirely on theological motivation or on mission incentive: Paul wants to correct the errors

47Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 122.

of the antinomians and/or wants to make Rome the headquarters for the evangelization of Spain. To be sure, these matters are important, but we should begin with the reason first stated by Paul himself in this very epistle.\textsuperscript{49}

When the personal aspects of Paul’s letters are overlooked, the necessity to understand the significance of love in revitalizing hurting churches is lost.

In addition to the above examples of Philippians and Romans, an even more explicit expression of Paul’s love for the church can be found in Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul writes, “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.” In his commentary on this most endearing passage, Michael Holmes explains,

Verse 8 further develops this image of love and tender concern. So strong was Paul’s (and his companions’) affection (a rare verb, \textit{homeiromenoi}; cf. Job 3:21 LXX) for the Thessalonians that they freely chose (NIV ‘were delighted,’ or ‘gladly decided’) to share with them not only the message they had been commissioned to deliver, but also themselves—because, as things turned out, the Thessalonians had become ‘so dear’ (i.e., \textit{agapetoi}, ‘beloved’) both to God (cf. 1:4) and to Paul, Silas, and Timothy.\textsuperscript{50}

The love Paul felt for the church in Thessalonica can be fully understood only when one sees that Paul was employing comparative language that vividly portrayed his work like that of a nurse. Just as a nurse “fills her duty by caring for others and goes beyond duty in cherishing her own, so the missionaries fulfill their obligations by sharing the gospel and go beyond obligation by sharing themselves.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., italics in original.

\textsuperscript{50}Michael Holmes, \textit{1 & 2 Thessalonians}, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 64-65.

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., 65.
Examples such as these leave little doubt about Paul’s love for the church. The churches with whom Paul worked were not perfect. Their shortcomings, however, did not short-circuit his love for them. Instead, Paul affirmed his love with words and then expressed his love in action by giving himself sacrificially to these churches. Paul’s selfless actions reveal that he indeed had the churches’ best interest at heart, thus revealing the love he felt for these congregations. This love that Paul felt and expressed to the church created a trusting relationship that enabled him to offer instruction regarding institutional issues needing attention.

**Pray for the Church**

Another way Paul demonstrated his love for the church was by praying for them. Hellenistic letters from the time of Paul “usually contained a health wish and a prayer to the gods for the addressee,” and Paul followed this pattern with a prayer of thanksgiving or blessing for the churches to whom he wrote. Indeed, Schreiner cites 1 Cor 1:4-9; Col 1:3-8, 2 Cor 1:3-7; Eph 1:3-14 as examples.

Unfortunately, prayer is too frequently a missing component of Christian ministry today. In his book, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, Stephen Macchia has argued that “one of the greatest sins of the Christian church today is an independent spirit.” This unhealthy spirit of independence, he believes, is a natural byproduct of American culture. He makes this point by writing,

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53 Ibid.

In a land of freedom and democracy we are encouraged to think creatively for ourselves, to go outside the “box” of traditional norms. We are in a staggering growth mode when it comes to technological advances. We thrive in a culture of information, learning, and new tools to better serve whatever cause we are aligned with. The universities influence young adults to bring new ideas into the workforce, family, and community and encourage them to pursue a pioneering spirit for the rest of their lives. Such thinking has many benefits, as the positive advances of our culture show. But this also sets up a serious challenge within a subcultural movement like the church.\textsuperscript{55}

In order for healthy churches to exist in America, revitalization agents must not only encourage churches to seek the power of God through prayer, but they must love the church enough to do likewise on their behalf.

Such was clearly the case with Paul. Throughout his letters, Paul repeatedly demonstrated his love to the church by praying for them. Polhill has observed that Paul, “often offered a prayer on behalf of his readers and stated how he held them fondly in his memory whenever he mentioned them in his prayers (Phil 1:3-4). In Paul’s epistles, these elements of prayer and memory are part of the thanksgiving that regularly follows the salutation.”\textsuperscript{56}

While it is true that Paul’s prayers for the church typically followed the letter’s salutation, that is not to say that Paul’s prayers were simply an endearing greeting or a bridge to the body of the letter. In fact, “Paul’s thanksgiving and intercessory prayers often signal the major themes in the letter, and thus demand careful analysis.”\textsuperscript{57} For example,

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 29-30.

\textsuperscript{56}Polhill, \textit{Paul & His Letters}, 124. Polhill’s point here is that the prayers of Paul are so common that they should be understood as a distinct piece of Paul’s traditional outline. While Paul’s prayers for the church are common, they are not found in Galatians, 2 Corinthians, and Titus.

\textsuperscript{57}Schreiner, \textit{Interpreting the Pauline Epistles}, 29.
In 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 Paul thanks God for the spiritual gifts and the richness of knowledge in the Corinthian community. We know from the rest of the letter (chaps. 1-4; 8-10; 12-14) that the Corinthians misunderstood the role of knowledge and spiritual gifts. They wrongly exalted themselves for their superior knowledge and their experience of spiritual gifts. Paul acknowledges from the beginning of the letter that spiritual gifts and knowledge are to be celebrated. Nevertheless, the thanksgiving section stresses that all praise should go to God for these benefits, not to the Corinthians. There is no justification for pride or self-exaltation. The thanksgiving anticipates, then, Paul’s subsequent response to the problems in the Corinthians community.\(^{58}\)

Such an analysis of Paul’s prayers reveals not only his love for the church, but also his concern for the struggles they were experiencing. Paul’s prayers were clearly not superficial greetings, but rather a genuine plea for God to help the churches he loved. In the case of Corinth, Paul prayed for the church because he loved them and because he longed to see God work in this congregation to develop a more healthy expression of spiritual gifts and knowledge—institutional issues that affect the health of the church.

Like Paul, revitalization agents today must make prayer a priority. These prayers cannot be mere formalities, but must instead be genuine pleas to the living God for supernatural involvement to assist the church in overcoming obstacles to health. If the way revitalization agents and church leaders pray today “is far removed from the center of Paul’s praying, then even our very praying may serve as a wretched testimony to the remarkable success of the processes of paganization in our life and thought.”\(^{59}\) Such a failure to pray, then, is not only an institutional factor, but is also a spiritual factor which must be addressed in order for the health of the church to improve.

\(^{58}\)Ibid., italics in original.

Reprimand the Church

One of the more surprising ways Paul demonstrated his love for the church was by reprimanding it. In his work with the churches in both Galatia and Corinth, Paul discovered unhealthy situations that needed to be rectified. Some of the issues which Paul addressed required a confrontational approach which was likely difficult for Paul to convey and difficult for the church to hear (Gal 1:6; 3:1-3; 1 Cor 5:1-5). Nevertheless, Paul willingly reprimanded these congregations because he loved them.

In the opening chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul wasted no time identifying the issue which had him so concerned: “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel” (1:6). The forcefulness of his reprimand, however, is not fully felt until 3:1-3, “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish?”

The language Paul employed in these verses would likely cause one to question Paul’s love for the Galatians. In chapter 4, however, a distinct shift in tone occurs, and Paul’s love for the church becomes more apparent: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you” (4:19-20). This text suggests that, “The reason why Paul reprimands the Galatians so sharply and warns them so sternly is that he loves them with a love that is genuine, tender, and deep.”

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60 Hendriksen, Galatians, 22.
Paul felt for the church prompted him to address the institutional issue by reprimanding them and calling them to think correctly about the gospel and their salvation.

Paul also demonstrated his love to the church in Corinth in a way that resembled his expression of love to the Galatians. In Corinth, however, the issues that had Paul concerned were more numerous. Paul had addressed dissension in the church (1 Cor 1:10-17), sexual immorality in the congregation (1 Cor 5), lawsuits among believers (1 Cor 6:1-8), abuses of Christian liberty (1 Cor 8), and an unhealthy use of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12; 14), each of which could be understood as institutional issues.

Paul reprimanded the church by revealing the error of their actions and by offering instruction regarding the appropriate Christian response in each situation. To the church in Galatia, Paul instructed the church to seek justification through the work of the Spirit, rather than through their own works according to the Law (3:4-14). For those in Corinth who were misguided in their allegiance, Paul reminded them that Christ was crucified for all (1 Cor 1:13), and consequently, all owe their allegiance to Him. To the immoral brother, Paul encouraged the church to exercise church discipline “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:5). To the believers who were guilty of taking their disputes before a public court, Paul shamed them and encouraged them to find within the church “one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren” (6:5). To those in Corinth who abused their Christian liberty, Paul instructed believers to set aside their freedoms in Christ for the sake of the weaker brother (8:9).

Finally, to those who exercised their spiritual gifts in an unhealthy manner, Paul provided specific instruction regarding guidelines for orderly worship (1 Cor 14:13) and encouraged them to exercise the greatest gift of all—the gift of love (1 Cor 13:1-3,
13). In each case, Paul’s reprimand was accompanied by instruction—instruction that revealed his love and that could be used to address these institutional issues en route to improved church health.

In a subsequent letter to the church in Corinth, Paul explained the emotion behind his previous letter, saying, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love I have especially for you” (2 Cor 2:4). Paul wanted the church to understand that he is neither ironhearted nor ironhanded. His love for them motivated his actions entirely. If they were grieved, he leaves no doubt that he was grieved more. Paul insists that the grief he caused them was the surest sign of his love. He gives them direction and rebukes them as a loving father would (see also 7:8-10; 10:6; 1 Cor 4:14-16, 21). In the Jewish tradition about paternal discipline, chastisement is proof of love. ‘My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.’ (Prov 3:11-12). In spite of being the object of the Corinthians’ abuse, Paul, like a good father, continues to seek their best interests and responds to impudence with sacrificial love. . . . The determination and tenacity it requires to straighten out the child and to remedy the hurt is one of the clearest signs of love.61

The examples of Galatia and Corinth portray situations where Paul learned about unhealthy conditions within the church—that is, institutional factors that the church could change. While he may have been tempted to avoid conflict by remaining silent on these issues, Paul elected instead to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). As a result, the churches heard about how to rectify these situations and improve the health of their congregations. Revitalization agents today must be equally motivated by love to confront issues that the church can change.

Admonish the Church

Another way Paul demonstrated his love for churches was by admonishing them. The Greek term commonly translated as admonish is νουθετέω. Paul used the term to denote “admonition which is designed to correct while not provoking or embittering. . . . His pastoral work in a congregation is retrospectively presented as a special, inwardly motivated cure of souls by means of indefatigable exhortation with a view to correction and amendment.”

Paul’s work in admonishing churches was similar to the work he conducted when reprimanding churches. There are, however, at least two ways in which the work differed. First, a reprimand was typically conducted in a harsher tone. As noted above, the language Paul employed when reprimanding churches of Galatia and Corinth was forceful and resembled a rebuke. Admonishment, though, was conducted in a way that resembled a gentle reminder, as the definition above suggests. Second, Paul reserved the reprimand to confront situations where the church was acting in a way that was more overtly disobedient. In the case of Galatia, for example, Paul reprimanded the believers for exchanging the true gospel he preached for a false gospel proclaimed by others (Gal 1:6-7). Admonishment, on the other hand, was more commonly reserved as a means of encouragement that Paul often employed to encourage the church to do what was right (Col 3:16; Titus 2:4).

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63 In Colossians 3:16 Paul wanted to see the church “admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” In Titus 2:4 Paul wanted the older women in the congregation to admonish “the young women to love their husbands, to love their children.” In both cases, Paul uses the term “admonish” to encourage godly behavior, rather than the harsher reprimand that was used to confront overtly disobedient behavior.
In Acts 20:31 Paul spoke of the significant amount of time he had invested in the task of admonishment; “night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” Paul spent three years of his ministry in Ephesus warning the church to “be on the alert. He did so night and day with tears. In short, Paul gave himself heart, soul, and mind to the work of admonishing the believers to follow the Lord. And in the shedding of his tears, he demonstrated his loving concern as a pastor of the Ephesian congregation.”

In addition to the extensive period of time Paul spent admonishing the Ephesians in person, he also admonished the Corinthians via the letters he wrote. In 1 Corinthians 4:14, Paul explained, “I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.” Paul’s statement, again, reveals the loving nature of his admonishment. Kistemaker has described Paul’s words as “the words of a father who in love corrects his children. Paul addresses the Corinthians in genuine love; thus he writes the adjective dear, which in older translations is beloved.”

What is clear from these examples is that Paul loved his churches enough to admonish them. When he saw institutional issues that needed to be addressed, he did not hesitate to challenge the church to be the church that God wanted them to be. While his admonitions may have been perceived as criticism, it is undeniable that Paul had the church’s best interest in mind and spoke from a heart of love in an attempt to promote church health.


Sacrifice for the Church

A final way Paul demonstrated his love for the church was by making personal sacrifices for it. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8-9, Paul specifically spoke of wedding his love for the church to his personal sacrifice: “Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you.”

In his commentary on the text, Hendriksen explains the language Paul employs in 2:9,

refers not so much to the labor and weariness connected with tent-making as to the entire thought connected to the sentence, namely, that the missionaries had been working by night and by day (part of the night, part of the day; note the genitive), and had been preaching besides! It must have been very hard, indeed, to find time for all this, and not to break down under the load. Yet for the sake of the gospel of God and out of love for the Thessalonians, most of whom were ordinary laborers, the burden had been gladly borne.  

The point is clear. Paul and his colleagues willingly endured long hours during their ministry in Thessalonica. Without the missionaries’ sacrifice and willingness to be self-supported, the church may have been hindered financially in their ministry efforts, consequentially creating an institutional issue that would have weakened the health of the church. Paul’s motivation to make such a personal sacrifice was nothing other than love—for God, for the gospel, and for the Thessalonians.

A similar example of Paul’s sacrifice for the church in Corinth is apparent in his writings to that church. In 2 Corinthians 2:7 Paul made the point that he preached the

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gospel to them without charge, a sacrifice he willingly made to ensure he “was not a burden to anyone” (2:9). Paul knew that to become a financial burden to the church could result in a deterioration of church health. For this reason, he made personal sacrifices to avoid hindering the work of the church.

Unfortunately, the Corinthians took his unwillingness to be financially compensated as an insult. They could not understand why Paul would receive gifts from the church in Philippi (Phil 4:10-23), for example, but not from them. Their failure to understand Paul’s decision “reveals a failure to understand their apostle fully, but, more seriously, a failure to understand the gospel that exchanges self-exaltation for self-sacrifice in service to others.”

Paul was careful to eradicate any concerns the Corinthians may have had about Paul’s accepting remuneration from other churches, but not from them. In 2 Corinthians 11:11 he posed the rhetorical question they may have been asking, “Because I do not love you?”, and responded by saying, “God knows I do!” At this point, it becomes clear that Paul was driven to serve this church by making personal sacrifices out of his love for this congregation.

Paul, however, did not end the discussion there. He continued to write of his personal sufferings and the sacrifices he had made for the churches he loved so sincerely. The picture painted in verses 23-27 portrays Paul as one who had been “lacerated by beatings, shadowed by enemies, worn down by exposure and deprivation, in shreds and tatters, and with no place to lay his head.” There likely had been even more physical distress, but Paul then “drops it to turn his attention to the physiological stress of

67 Garland, 2 Corinthians, 474.
worrying about the churches in his care.” Indeed, in 11:28 Paul added, “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.” A careful reading of this text is painful, but it removes all doubt about Paul’s willingness to make both physical and physiological sacrifices for the churches he loved.

As bad as these sacrifices must have been, Paul’s greatest sacrifice was still yet to be made. Paul would ultimately die as a leader of the church. Polhill has documented that,

The church in Rome from its earliest days considered Paul and Peter together as its cofounders and as martyrs who sacrificed themselves for it. In subsequent centuries, the Roman tradition elevated Peter alone to the role of founder and first pontiff, eclipsing Paul. Still, Paul continued to be venerated in the role of martyr and saint. While it is unlikely that Paul assisted in founding the church in Rome, few question that he died there. In the end, Paul shared such a genuine love for the church that, like Jesus, he sacrificed his life for her and for the God he worshipped.

Summary

Paul’s revitalization ministry was marked by love. His love for the church drove him to take action in a variety of ways to eliminate institutional issues that could damage the health of the church. Paul’s willingness to speak the truth in love, pray out of love, reprimand the church in love, admonish the church in love, and personally sacrifice out of love is likely to have made a tangible difference in the health of his churches.

68Ibid., 501.

69Ibid.

70Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 440-41, italics in original.
With that being said, these expressions of love are not intended to be an exhaustive list of the ways in which Paul demonstrated his love for the church. Love can be expressed in an immeasurable number of ways. Instead, these are examples that reflected Paul’s genuine love and concern for the churches he advised. As revitalization agents today conduct their ministries, they too must find concrete ways to demonstrate love for the churches they advise.

**Conclusion**

Throughout his ministry, Paul dealt with the reality of institutional issues in the church. In each church, specific issues emerged. Each issue that emerged had the potential to improve or corrupt the health of the church. Paul was not only willing to address these issues, he was also capable. His in-depth understanding of specific institutional factors equipped him to offer instruction designed to improve the health of the local churches he advised.

In addition to understanding the institutional factors, Paul had an innate love for the church that he expressed in a variety of ways. His ministry was by no means marked by detachment. Instead, Paul genuinely loved his churches and expressed that love by verbalizing it, by praying for the church, by reprimanding the church, by admonishing the church, and by making personal sacrifices for the church.

As revitalization agents and church leaders today seek to improve the health of struggling churches, they must not overlook the magnitude of institutional factors. Like Paul, they must thoroughly understand the church and express genuine love for it as they search for real solutions. While the institutional issues today are, in some ways, different, the need to address those issues remains the same.
CHAPTER 5

PAUL’S STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING SPIRITUAL FACTORS

Introduction

The third factors which McGavran believed affected the growth and health of the local church were spiritual factors. In his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran argued, “The Holy Spirit is sovereign, and he is not subject to contextual or institutional factors. He frequently acts in surprising, nontraditional ways, and it is up to those Christian leaders who want to be effective in growth to have an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”¹

Spiritual factors, however, do not consider only the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. The church must also understand the reality of a spiritual enemy who opposes both God and His church. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminded the church about their real enemy: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).

Churches who want to be healthy must understand both dynamics of the spiritual reality. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to gain a Pauline understanding of the enemy and his strategies to create unhealthy conditions within the church. Second,

this chapter will reveal Paul’s God-inspired strategy for preserving the health of the local church, even in the midst of intense spiritual conflict.

**Principle 1: Know Why Satan Attacks the Church**

In any battle it is advantageous for one to know his enemy. The church’s battle with Satan is no exception. In his work with churches, Paul exhibited in-depth knowledge of why and how Satan attacks the church.

The fact that the Bible uses warfare terminology indicates an intense struggle in which casualties are likely to occur. Churches who take seriously the task of the Great Commission (Matt 28: 18-20) pose a more serious threat to Satan and his kingdom. It should not come as a surprise then, when Satan, “seeks to curtail the evangelistic efforts of Christians. Evangelistic activity represents a frontal assault on Satan’s dominion. Indeed he makes every effort to frustrate Christians who seek to reveal the redemptive message of the gospel.”\(^2\)

For example, the Apostle “Paul was not always able to do what he wanted in his ministry, and one reason for this was Satan.”\(^3\) As Paul traveled the world sharing Christ and planting churches, he posed a threat to the enemy. Satan responded by obstructing Paul’s ministry efforts whenever possible. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 Paul explained, “For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.” Clearly, “Paul’s inability to reach Thessalonica had nothing to do with


either what he willed or what God willed: in his mind, it was simply the result of Satan hindering him (1 Thess 2:18).”

In this example, the precise strategy Satan implemented to hinder Christian ministry is not given. What this example does provide, however, is affirmation that Satan does indeed exert “a powerful influence over the affairs of men, especially when they endeavor to promote the interests of the kingdom of God.” The following texts provide additional insight into the motivation behind Satan’s attempts to hinder the ministry of the church.

Ephesians 2:1-3—Non-believers Follow the Prince of the Power of the Air

As Paul wrote to the church in the area of Ephesus, he informed his readers of the difference Christ had made in their lives. Specifically, he wrote,

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lust of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Satan is by nature the adversary, and he particularly despises the transformation Christ

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4Greg Boyd, God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 53.

5Michael Holmes, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 95. Even though the precise manner in which Satan prevented Paul from traveling to Thessalonica is not given, Holmes does suggest two possibilities: “In view of Acts 17:9, it is possible that there were legal barriers to his return. On the other hand, if the ‘thorn in the flesh’ of 2 Corinthians 12:7 was an illness, it may be that poor health prevented Paul from traveling.”

can generate in one’s life. Consequently, he is motivated to attack the church in an attempt to keep such change from occurring.

First, Satan is motivated by a desire to see people remain in a state of spiritual death. Paul stated that believers were once “dead” in their sins, referring “to the spiritual deadness that characterizes man without God. . . . What is meant is a real and present death. The most vital part of man’s personality—the spirit—is dead to the most important factor in life—God.” Satan works among the sons of disobedience to keep them living in sinful rebellion against God because he knows that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). When the gospel is proclaimed and believed, however, people are spiritually redeemed and Satan’s death grip is lost on those he once held in bondage. Consequently, Satan will attack the church who proclaims the liberating message of Christ in an attempt to keep his captives in a state of spiritual death.

Second, Satan is motivated by a desire to see people remain under the influence of the forces of evil. Ephesians 2:1-3 highlights three forces in particular that influence the unbeliever: the world, the prince of the power of the air, and the desires of the flesh. Arnold has argued that Satan (that is, the prince of the air) supplements his own work with two additional compelling forces, the world and the flesh, to make three strands which combine to make one sturdy cable. This cable tightly binds unbelievers, retaining them in slavery to the kingdom of darkness. Once unbelievers embrace the

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gospel this cable is loosened, the influence of evil is weakened, and the new believer is liberated to live according to the Spirit of God.

Satan’s desire to keep people subjected to the powerful forces of evil prompts him to attack the church—especially the evangelistic ones. When the church under spiritual attack loses its evangelistic focus, then, the message of Christ is not proclaimed and people remain under the influential forces of evil.

Finally, Satan is motivated by a desire to see people remain objects of God’s wrath. Ephesians 2:3 describes people who were “by nature children of wrath.” This phrase describes “the attitude of God toward men viewed as fallen in Adam (Rom. 5:12; 17-19) and refusing to accept the gospel of grace and salvation in Christ. It is with respect to them that it is written: ‘He who . . . disobeys the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him’ (John 3:36).”\(^{10}\) Satan, the accuser (Rev 12:10), longs to see the prize of God’s creation—mankind—subjected to divine wrath, and the enemy attacks the church to this end.

**2 Corinthians 4:3-4—Non-believers are Blinded by the God of this World**

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul offered additional information to explain why Satan attacks the church. Beginning in verse 3 he writes, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Paul’s phrase, “the god of this age” in

verse 3 refers “not to God the Father, but to Satan regarded as ‘the prince of this world; (John 12:31) or as the one whom this age has made its god.” It is clear, then, that Satan is the agent who is actively working to prevent people from seeing the light of the gospel. This text reveals at least two factors which motivate Satan to work toward this goal.

First, Satan is motivated by a desire to see people perish. Paul noted that the gospel is veiled to “those who are perishing” (4:3). If Satan can continue to prevent people from seeing their need for Christ, he will also further their destruction. Destruction is appetizing to Satan, who, according to Jesus, longs to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10). The “perishing” terminology Paul used describes those who reject Christ and “are now being malformed into the image of the god of this age, whom they serve. This god, however, wreaks only blindness, death, and destruction.”

Second, Satan is motivated by a desire to keep people in a state of spiritual blindness. Paul wrote that Satan defends his evil fortress and keeps people in bondage by blinding “the minds of the unbelieving” (2 Cor 4:4). Satan inflicts unbelievers with spiritual blindness in order to prevent them from seeing and understanding the truth of the

11Murray Harris, 2 Corinthians, in vol. 10 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 340.


13Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 937-38, recognizes that man is initially separated from God because of his sinful nature. That is, Satan’s blinding is not the ultimate cause of man’s lostness. Erickson points to Romans 3, noting, “Paul depicts the human race as hopelessly separated from God because of their sin. They are unable to do anything to extricate themselves from this condition, and in fact, being quite blind to their situation, have no desire to do so. Calvinists and conservative Arminians agree on this. It is not merely that humans cannot in their nature state do good works of a type that would justify them in God’s sight. Beyond that, they are afflicted with spiritual blindness (Rom 1:18-23; 2 Cor 4:3-4) and insensitivity.”
gospel. The blindness Satan inflicts serves to continually perpetuate their unbelief.

Because the gospel is the only hope unbelievers have of being freed from Satan’s domain (Eph 4:1-5; Col 1:3-5; 1 Thess 5:8), one should expect the gospel, and those who preach it, to become targets of the enemy.

**Colossians 1:13-14—Non-believers are in the Domain of Darkness**

In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul shed additional light on Satan’s motivation for attacking the church. As he detailed what Christ has done for those who believe, he wrote, “For he rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” While Satan’s primary motivating factor is to keep people in the domain of darkness rather than the kingdom of light, this text offers additional insight into the consequences of that reality, a reality which satisfies Satan’s appetite for destruction.

First, Satan attacks the church because he desires to keep unbelievers living in the domain of darkness. The domain of darkness is “the sphere in which Satan exercises his usurped jurisdiction (Matt 4:8-11; Luke 22:52, 53; cf. Acts 26:18) over human hearts, lives, activities, and over all ‘the powers of the air,’ ‘the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’” (Eph 2:2; 6:12). Humanity is born into this darkness, and they remain there apart from the grace of God (1 Pet 2:9).

Second, Satan attacks the church because he wants to prevent people from experiencing redemption and the forgiveness of sins. The term “redemption” refers to a

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“release brought about by the payment of a price, was used of the deliverance of slaves from bondage or of prisoners of war from captivity.”\footnote{Curtis Vaughan, Colossians, in vol. 11 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 33.} When people are redeemed through the death of Christ, they experience complete forgiveness and are released from the domain of darkness. Forgiveness, Garland argues, “is not simply a liberation from the past; it sets us free for the present and future. It opens the possibility of living a life worthy of the Lord (Col 1:10). Paul says that the Colossians used to give their lives to sin, which brings only God’s wrath (3:5-7), but now they give their lives to Christ, which brings joy and light (2:6).”\footnote{David Garland, Colossians, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 68.}

**Acts 26:18—Non-believers are in Darkness**

Finally, in Acts 26:18 Paul offers at least two more insights that provide understanding of why Satan attacks the church. In his testimony before King Agrippa, Paul spoke of his call into ministry. His call was a call to “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”

While this verse restates many of the motivating factors listed above, two more insights are assumed. First, Satan is motivated by a desire to keep people from receiving an inheritance from God. As people hear the gospel message and believe, they experience forgiveness of sins but ultimately are promised something more—an
inheritance. This inheritance is “assurance of a place, a portion among the saints in God’s eternal kingdom.” The Greek term for inheritance, κληρος, is used in the NT for the ‘portion allotted to someone.’ As in the OT, this is something which is given rather than won; it is given by God. . . . For the Jews the decisive question was whether they had a portion in Moses (Ass. Mos. 2:2—761). For Christians, however, the decisive question is whether they have a portion in the Word or gift of God. . . . κληρος is used to denote the eschatological portion assigned to man: Ac. 26:18.

Satan desires to keep people captive in his kingdom and thus is motivated to hinder any activity that results in granting this inheritance.

Second, Satan is motivated by a desire to keep people in a state of spiritual filth. Those who experience forgiveness of sins are also sanctified by Christ (Eph 5:26). Forgiveness and sanctification work in tandem to produce spiritual cleanliness. Salvation occurs “when the sinner repents, is cleansed from sin, and takes his place among those who have obtained their spiritual inheritance through faith in Christ. The believer receives his inheritance when Jesus, having declared him holy, embraces him and welcomes him into the fellowship with the saints.”

Sanctification occurs post-conversion and “is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives.” Satan abhors the cleansing from sin and the acquisition of holiness. His hatred for such products of grace motivates him to attack

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the church with ferocity.

The church that is serious about evangelism and discipleship is a threat to Satan and his kingdom. The church opposes this formidable enemy and must consequently prepare for his attack. Before analyzing Paul’s strategy for engaging the enemy, it is therefore beneficial to first understand some of the common ways in which Satan attacks the church.

**Principle 2: Know How Satan Attacks the Church**

The very nature of the church can make it difficult to understand how Satan attacks. In one sense, “the church consists of individuals, but it is also a corporate body.” As will be shown, Satan attacks the church on both the corporate and individual levels, but with the same goal in mind: silencing the witness of the church to ensure he retains those he now holds as prisoners of his kingdom.

**Inciting Members of the Church to Sin**

As Clinton Arnold notes, “The gospel must be proclaimed in the power of the Spirit because the church faces an enemy of supernatural proportions, who commands a host of angelic powers seeking to prevent the spread of the kingdom of Christ.” In fact, there are a variety of ways in which Satan attacks as he seeks to protect his house from being plundered (Mark 3:27). One of the more common attacks Satan employs against the church is enticing Christians to sin. If this strategy is successful, the believer’s witness is shamefully discredited and unbelievers charge believers with

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hypocrisy. Sin thus grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), leaving Christians to do ministry ineffectively in their own power.

Therefore, Paul stated in the imperative, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30). In the surrounding context of this verse, Paul listed an array of sins which grieve the Holy Spirit. Specifically, he cited lying (4:25), inappropriate anger (4:26-27), stealing (4:28), inappropriate speech (4:29), bitterness (4:31), slander (4:31), unforgiving attitudes (4:32), and numerous other forms of immorality (5:3-5). It is easy to see how Satan’s goal is accomplished when believers succumb to sin. The Christian participates in immoral behavior, the Spirit of God is grieved, the supernatural activity of God’s working through human agents is weakened, and the likelihood of Satan’s captives remaining in bondage increases.

In Ephesians 4:26-27, Paul warned the Ephesians to be especially cautious not to succumb to inappropriate anger, which can be used by Satan to gain a foothold. Specifically, Paul said, “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.” Here, Paul portrayed Satan as an opportunistic enemy. The term translated here as opportunity is the Greek word τόπον which literally means, “place.” Paul, then, was instructing Christians in Ephesus not to “give the devil room in our lives to operate. Anger is one place of inroad for him, a Trojan horse for his attack.”

Hendriksen explains the danger of this sin, in particular, by showing that the devil can quickly turn harbored anger
into a grievance, a grudge, a nursing of wrath, an unwillingness to forgive. Paul was very conscious of the reality, the power, and the deceitfulness of the devil, as 6:10 shows. No place whatsoever must be given to him, no room to enter or even to stand. There must be no yielding to or compromise with him. He must not be given any opportunity to take advantage of our anger for his own sinister purposes.  

Unresolved anger is too often the opportunity Satan pounces on to disrupt the effectiveness of the church. When those in the church become internally focused on strained relationships within the body of Christ, its focus on plundering Satan’s house is lost. Consequently, Paul instructed the church, “do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26). Before another day begins, even better, before the sun sets, “genuine forgiveness must not only have filled the heart but must, if at all possible, have come to open expression so that the neighbor has benefited from its blessing.” When the church handles anger in this fashion, no foothold will be present for Satan and his forces to attack; indeed, this doorway will be shut altogether.

Another area of morality through which Satan attacks the church is sexuality. In 1 Corinthians 7:5-6 Paul commanded married Christian couples to, “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” Fasting from sexual relations for the purpose of prayer is certainly a pious act. Paul, however, wanted no one to conclude, “Temporary abstinence is good, but

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24Hendriksen, Ephesians, 218, italics in original.

25Ibid.
permanent abstinence is better.”\textsuperscript{26} Instead, Paul drew his readers’ attention to Satan, who seeks to exploit human weakness by enticing either the husband or the wife into committing adultery.

Satan is again depicted as the opportunistic enemy, lying in wait for susceptible prey. Sexual sin is an especially lethal weapon in Satan’s arsenal. The very warning found in 1 Corinthians 7:5 “presupposes that it is very difficult to abstain completely from sexual activity. To expose oneself to unnecessary temptation by denying the legitimate satisfaction of one’s sexual needs is foolhardy (cf. 1 Cor 7:2).”\textsuperscript{27}

This approach is lethal not only because it is effective, but also because this sin is perceived as scandalous, both inside and outside the church. As stories of adultery and infidelity circulate, the church is inevitably distracted from its mission of proclaiming the gospel. Even if those in the church were to remain faithful to the task of plundering the strongman’s house, the credibility of the church is now compromised and the message of the gospel is now questioned. Additionally, when Satan attacks the church by enticing members to engage in sexual misconduct, he not only harms the church’s witness, but he also corrupts the image of Christ’s pure and loving relationship with the church (Eph 5:22-33). As married Christian couples give themselves to one another sexually, the church renders Satan “powerless to bring about the moral downfall of Christians”\textsuperscript{28} because they have taken the preventive measures Paul prescribed.


\textsuperscript{27}Page, \textit{Powers of Evil}, 189.

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid.
Satan’s ploy to use sin in his attack against the church is also evident in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul confronted young widows, a segment of the Christian community who struggled with issues of idleness and gossiping. Paul expressed his concern for the young widows who were “not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention” (1 Tim 5:13).

The behavior of this group made the church susceptible to attack. At the individual level, the reputation of these young widows was tarnished to the point that some had “already turned aside to follow Satan” (5:15). At the corporate level, Paul was convinced that their actions provided the enemy with an “occasion for reproach” (5:14). If these young widows continued in their ways, the church would be slandered and “God’s name would be dishonored.”

The dangers facing the church were real, but Paul was convinced that if these women would implement his instructions on godliness, the situation would improve (1 Tim 5:14-16). In doing so, the church had the potential to reposition itself as a threat to the enemy rather than a defeated target.

Another example of Satan attacking the church through moral avenues is found in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. As Paul analyzed the situation, he concluded that Satan was working to outwit the church by instigating among the Christian community an unwillingness to forgive. A particular man had apparently been subjected to church discipline and had repented, but those in the church still rejected him.


30Garland, 2 Corinthians, 118-19. Scholars have debated arduously in an attempt to identify this individual. Garland summarizes the historicity of the debate by adding, “The majority of ancient
Failing to forgive a repentant brother had the potential to generate harm on many levels. On the individual level, Paul was concerned that this brother “might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2:7). This man had sinned, been confronted, felt guilty, repented and was still being treated with contempt. On the corporate level, the church ran the risk of misrepresenting Christ. As things were, the world had little reason to believe Christ would forgive those who repented if Christians were not willing to do the same. If those in the city of Corinth reached such a conclusion, Satan’s goal of retaining those in his kingdom would have been at least temporarily accomplished.

To help the church navigate their way through this potential land mine, Paul instructed the church to practice forgiveness to the fullest extent. In doing so, they would “avoid being tricked by Satan’s evil schemes.”\textsuperscript{31} In the same way, the church today “ought to have a watchful respect for the enemy in order to avoid the consequences that follow his deception.”\textsuperscript{32}

**Creating Congregational Division**

Protecting congregational unity demands a great deal of attention from those interested in church health. In chapter 4, unity was shown to be an institutional factor Paul addressed in his letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus.


\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
Congregational unity, however, is also a spiritual factor because of the frequency in which Satan attacks the church at this vulnerable point.

The church’s failure to live in unity is another strategy Satan uses against the church. In creating division, the enemy all but renders the church useless. Franklin and Lawless make this point well when they ask,

Have you ever seen a church in the middle of a conflict grow, launch dynamic new programs, start new initiatives to the community, or gain a better reputation? What results when church members fight? Anger, hurt feelings, destroyed friendships, bitterness, loss of membership, loss of finances, and a host of other problems generally surface. . . . Wouldn’t it make sense, then, that one of Satan’s major goals would be to create division in the church?33

If Satan can influence church members to focus internally on their strife with one another, their focus on reaching outsiders with the gospel will be lost and his house will be safe from plundering. It is for all these reasons that “Satan works to create disunity in which God’s foot soldiers shoot their own comrades in the back. An army at war within offers little danger to its Enemy.”34

While many churches struggle to remain united in Christ, the church in Corinth was especially known for its divisiveness. As early as the first chapter, Paul began his plea, “I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there may be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1:10). Paul’s plea for unity and his discussion of the cause of the Corinthians’ division take up the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians—

33Franklin and Lawless, Spiritual Warfare, 90.

34Chuck Lawless, Discipled Warriors (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 169.
One reason Paul stressed unity to the Corinthians is because godly unity makes Christ the central focus of the church. Apparently, some believers in Corinth were declaring their allegiance to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Cephas and some to Christ (1:12). Paul confronted their misguided allegiance head on by redirecting all to follow Christ. This redirection was necessary to eliminate confusion about the object of our faith. Those inside the church, as well as those outside the church, needed to know that the call to Christianity was a call to follow Christ and no other.

Planting False Teachers

Paul wrote that Satan defends his evil fortress and keeps people living in bondage by blinding “the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4-5). Later in that same letter, Paul revealed one way Satan accomplishes his blinding work when he warned the church against false teachers who preach another Jesus, impart another spirit, and proclaim a different gospel (2 Cor 11:4). Since the gospel is the only hope unbelievers have of being freed from Satan’s domain (Col 1:13-14), one should fully expect the gospel to become a target of the enemy. This reality causes Satan to attack the


36The inclusion of the phrase, “and some to Christ” has led scholars to question whether Paul was condemning all parties in Corinth for their misguided allegiance, or only those who were not following Christ. Kistemaker notes, “Elsewhere he mentions the three names Paul, Apollos, and Cephas once more and then emphatically tells the Corinthians that they are of Christ (3:22-23; and II Cor 10:7).” Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 47.
church where the gospel is proclaimed by sending in false teachers who will corrupt the liberating truth of Christ.

One place where Satan employed this strategy was in the church in Galatia. John Polhill’s analysis of Galatians 1:6-9 is helpful in pinpointing the purpose of the letter. He notes,

This paragraph sets forth the occasion which prompted Paul to write the epistle. ‘Some people’ (indefinite) were throwing the Galatians into confusion, attempting to pervert the gospel (v. 7). And the Galatians were following their lead! Employing military language, Paul said that they were ‘deserting’ their calling in Christ (v. 6). . . . Here at the outset he stated what really had him concerned about the Galatians; they were abandoning their original Christian calling for a false gospel.  

The book of Galatians, therefore, is a record of Paul’s standing against the enemy seeking to promote a gospel of justification by faith plus law, instead of the one true gospel of justification by faith alone.

Arnold remarks that what is surprising about this particular case is that, “even something that can be inherently good—the law—can be perverted by Satan and used to accomplish his own purposes. This evil influence came to the Galatians in the form of a new teaching propagated by people who appeared to them as credible and credentialed.” In spite of the persuasive manner in which this new teaching was presented, it was a tainted version of the truth that did little to unshackle those held in Satan’s captivity.

In general, if a church is to survive this attack and continue in their attempts to plunder the enemy’s house, people must be confronted, lies must be exposed, and the

37John Polhill, Paul & His Letters (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 145.

38Arnold, Powers of Darkness, 132.
truth must once again be clearly stated. It is important, however, to exercise wisdom and discernment in this process. Paul believed that some people required a gentle approach, while others needed a stern rebuke in order for the confrontation to be effective. In expounding on 2 Timothy 2:25-26 (a passage which deals with the same problem as the book of Galatians), Sydney Page affirms the need to meet head-on “those who have embraced heterodox teachings (v. 25).”39 He shows, however, that Paul saw the need to proceed with caution, recommending that “The servant of the Lord is to instruct such individuals gently, in order that they might ‘come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will’ (v. 26).”40

On the other hand, Paul was anything but gentle in his confrontation with those in Galatia, primarily because the health of the church was at risk and the gospel itself was under attack. Immediately following the introduction, Paul began his rebuke of the Galatians—a rebuke that is both clear and sharp. Specifically, Paul stated in 1:6, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel.” The term thaumazō, translated here as “amazed,”

has been variously translated as ‘astonished, marveled, amazed, astounded, surprised’ (cf. the French très étonné). While the expression ‘I am astonished that’ was a literary device commonly used in Hellenistic letters to express irritation and irony as well as surprise, Paul appears to have been genuinely shocked at the news he received from Galatia. The shock was further deepened because the slippage of his erstwhile disciples had occurred ‘so quickly.’41

40Ibid.
The reason for Paul’s forceful rebuke, instead of the gentle approach prescribed to Timothy, seems to be rooted in the situation within the church of Galatia. Paul described their actions with the word *metatithesthai*, a term that was “extended metaphorically to one who had changed allegiance from one country to another, a political traitor, or one who had switched sides in an armed military conflict, a military deserter. Paul claimed the Galatians were spiritual turncoats.” 

Paul’s choice of militant language suggests the presence of the enemy, an enemy the Galatians were in danger of following. Satan, “the father of lies” (John 8:44), had infiltrated the church with persuasive teachers who were spreading a false gospel that could destroy the church. Paul, therefore, felt that a stern rebuke was in order.

**Attacking Leaders of the Church**

A final way Satan has been known to infect the health of the church is by attacking the church’s leadership. As a leader himself, Paul was well aware of Satan’s preference to attack the influential leaders of God’s people. In his list of qualifications for overseers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul mentioned the devil twice. In verses 6 and 7, he described Satan as “a hunter who lays out traps into which the careless, short-sighted Christian can fall.”

The trap of which Paul warned was prematurely appointing a new believer to a position of leadership within the congregation. Paul wanted to prevent “what would likely happen if a neophyte were made a bishop, i.e., ‘in order that he may

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42Ibid., 91.

not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.” For this reason, Paul instructed the church to protect itself, and those who aspire to leadership roles, by being selective in their identification of leaders.

The scope of the destruction Satan might cause with this particular attack can also expand beyond the walls of the church. Paul taught that “Satan would actually set traps to malign the church and ultimately hinder its mission in the world. One of the qualifications for an overseer is a good reputation with non-Christians so that the leader would not be slandered and thus cause the church disgrace (1 Tim 3:7).” When leaders, however, give into Satan’s advances, the reputation of the church is diminished, the mission of the church is compromised, and unbelievers remain in captivity.

Satan’s attacks against leaders of the church are both individual and corporate. On the individual level, the leader himself is under attack. When Satan succeeds and leaders fall, the leader is subject to judgment (1 Tim 3:6). This attack is also, however, at the corporate level. When leaders fall, they typically leave a number of casualties in their wake. Franklin and Lawless have noted that when leaders compromise, people under the leader’s influence are affected negatively. Some may even go astray (Gal 2:11-13).

Paul gave the church at least two recommendations, which if followed, help protect the church and its leaders. First, the church must be insistent in appointing only

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45 Arnold, Powers of Darkness, 136.

46 Franklin and Lawless, Spiritual Warfare, 98.

47 Ibid., 97-98.
leaders who meet the lofty qualification for leadership. Appointing anyone else is giving the opportunistic enemy the opening he desires. Second, Paul instructed the church to pray for its leaders, including himself (Eph 6:18-19, 1 Tim 2:2). Paul knew that the prayers of the church would assist leaders in living “a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim 2:2), while also boosting his own courage to faithfully proclaim Christ (Eph 6:19).

**Inflicting Persecution and Physical Affliction**

While inciting members to sin, creating congregational divisions, planting false teachers, and attacking leaders of the church are the primary means Satan uses in his attack against the church, they are not the only means. Paul’s writings also show that Satan will attempt to hinder the church by persecuting and physically afflicting its members. In 1 Thessalonians 3:5, Paul wrote, “when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.” The exact nature of the temptation is ambiguous here, but the greater context suggests, “the temptation is that of abandoning the faith because of the persecution it brings.”

If those in Thessalonica were to abandon the faith, Satan would not only have driven a wedge between them and God, but he would also have effectively silenced their witness for Christ.

Paul had become concerned, maybe even convinced, that they were suffering severe persecution. This concern provoked him to dispatch Timothy to the battle scene.

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Timothy, however, “returns with a glowing report, praising the Thessalonians for their work, exertion, and endurance under persecution.”

In addition to violent persecution, Paul taught that physical affliction can be an attack from the enemy. Second Corinthians 12:7 details Paul’s personal experience: “to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.” The “thorn” Paul described in this text has been the subject of much debate among scholars for years. Polhill summarizes the debate succinctly by briefly describing some of the more popular interpretations:

A first interpretation sees the thorn as a fleshly temptation, particularly the sexual impulses. . . . A second more widely advocated view of Paul’s ‘thorn’ is that it was his enemies, in particular the opponents whom he was combatting at Corinth. . . . Finally, the metaphor of a ‘thorn’ is used in the Old Testament as a description of Israel’s enemies (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24). . . . Most interpreters are inclined to see Paul’s thorn in the flesh as a physical ailment. At that point the agreement ends.

While scholars will likely never know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was, what is clear is that Paul saw it as coming from Satan.

In addition to the thorn originating with the enemy, Paul also wrote that Satan used the thorn to torment him. The term translated as “torment” is the Greek term κολαφίζω. It carries “the more precise meaning of an illness which causes stabbing pains.” The fact that Paul pleaded with the Lord on three separate occasions to take it away demonstrates the relentless nature of Satan’s attack against the missionary/evangelist who dared plunder his house. Instead of taking the thorn away,

49Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 1 Thessalonians, 86.

50Polhill, Paul & His Letters, 40-41.

“God permitted this demonic agent to hurt Paul so that he would draw on the power of Christ and not his own strength,”\textsuperscript{52} thereby enabling Paul to do ministry more effectively in the power of the Spirit than on his own.

By understanding the spiritual factor of Satan’s attack, the church can better prepare for inevitable conflict with the enemy. Knowledge alone, however, is not enough. In his work with churches, Paul used his knowledge of the enemy’s schemes to construct a warfare strategy that, if implemented, would help the church live in victory.

**Principle 3: Know God to Experience Victory**

The spiritual warfare themes found throughout Pauline literature can seem overwhelming. Satan’s attacks against the church that threatens his kingdom are numerous, deceptively crafty, and seemingly relentless. At such a point, the church must remember the promise of God: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20). As Paul concluded his letter to the Romans he reminded them, and thus contemporary believers as well, “no matter how fierce Satan’s attacks may be, victory is assured. The battle is ultimately between God and Satan, and God will defeat his enemy.”\textsuperscript{53} This focus upon God as victor kept Paul motivated as he waged war with this formidable enemy.

Satan’s ultimate defeat has been announced since the earliest days of human history. Moo, for example, believes that in Romans 16:20 Paul alluded “to the famous protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15: ‘And I will put enmity between you and the woman,

\textsuperscript{52}Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 133.

and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”⁵⁴ While the decisive victory of this epic battle occurred at Calvary, a war is still being waged. Those in the church are not only co-heirs (Rom 8:17), but they also have the opportunity to be co-conquerors.⁵⁵

What is even more encouraging is “the emphasis in the text on Satan’s being crushed under the feet of the Roman believers. It is most natural to understand this as an expression of confidence that Christians can expect to experience victories over Satan in the circumstances of their daily lives.”⁵⁶ Victory, therefore, is not to be found only in some past event or distant future. Indeed, the church can experience victory here and now if they remain focused on God and follow Paul’s prescription for defeating the enemy.

**Put on God’s Armor**

As was the case with contextual factors and institutional factors, Paul also exhibited an in-depth understanding of spiritual factors. This point is not only evident in the insights he offered about why and how the enemy attacks, but it is also evident in his explanation of how the church is to stand against those attacks. In order to understand Paul’s armor analogy, it is important to appreciate his expertise on the subject at hand.

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⁵⁴Douglas Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 512, italics in original. For an explanation of the term “protoevangelium” see Kenneth Matthews, *Genesis 1:1-11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 247. There, Matthews explains that “Christian tradition has referred to 3:15 as the protoevangelium since it has been taken as the prototype for the Christian gospel.”


⁵⁶Ibid.
Franklin and Lawless have drawn attention to Paul’s expertise in this critical area of church health by writing,

In Ephesians 6 we’re not reading the advice of some boot-camp private. We’re not taking counsel from some green recruit. Instead, we’re gleaning wisdom from one of the most decorated saints in history. Paul was a seasoned veteran in spiritual warfare. When he spoke of taking up the armor, perhaps no other person except Christ had more insight into this matter. We would do well to pay special attention to every word from the most extensive passage Paul ever wrote on the subject.57

In Ephesians 6:10, Paul admonished the church to remain focused on God in the midst of the battle by being “strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.” He did acknowledge, however, that such a challenge would not be easy, “for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (6:12). He informed them that they had been equipped for this spiritual struggle and must put on the full armor of God so they could stand against the attacks of their enemy (6:11, 13). In his armor, the believers could be victorious.

Scholars have referred to concluding remarks in a letter like Ephesians 6:10 and following as a peroratio. Peroratio is “the final section of a speech that sought to recapitulate and to arouse to action.”58 As any persuasive communicator would do, Paul closed his letter with a final clinching argument that would motivate his readers to take action. Paul’s conclusion in 6:10-24, then, was not simply a summary of the contents of his letter, but was instead a call to appropriate action in response to everything which


preceded his conclusion. More specifically, Paul instructed the church to put on six pieces of armor which would keep them strong and healthy in the day of evil.

Understanding the entire body of armor is required for believers to adequately protect themselves from the enemy’s attack. Likewise, believers must wear the full armor of God (Eph 6:11). Just as a soldier would be vulnerable without an entire suit of armor, so believers become vulnerable when only certain pieces of the armor are worn. Paul’s words paint the picture of “a complete outfit (panoplia; NIV, ‘full armor,’ v. 13). The soldier must be protected from head to foot and the panoplia is made up of all the various hoopla or pieces of armor, both defensive and offensive.”

The Belt of Truth. The first piece of armor God gives to the church is the belt of truth (6:14). Truth is both a critical foundation and a critical component of the Christian life. For example,

Paul saw the gospel as ‘truth’ (Eph 1:13) and as the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). . . . Believers need to be convinced and assured of the gospel’s truth and what it affirms about them as God’s children. By implication, believers need to conduct their lives in a manner consistent with the truth of the gospel. Lying and deceit can have no place in a believer’s life; they are an affront to the God of truth. Consequently, in Ephesians, Paul told each Christian that he or she ‘must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor’ (Eph 4:25; see also 5:9).

In his attack against the church, Satan targets the truth. As Christians, “we succumb to Satan’s temptations when we speak or live anything less than the truth. If we don’t know Jesus in a personal way, we can’t wear the belt of truth. If we don’t

59Wood, Ephesians, 86.

60Arnold, Power of Darkness, 155.
consistently tell the truth, we aren’t wearing the belt. When we live a life of hypocrisy, the belt is not on us.”

Satan, however, does not limit his attack on truth to the individual level. At the corporate level, Satan seeks to attack the church by distorting the truth. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warned of a time to come when “they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3-4). It is significant that Paul spoke these words concerning believers. In the previous chapter (3:6-9, 13), “Paul had described the actions of false teachers. Now he warned that even professing believers would feel the influence of this wanderlust for unfamiliar ideas and the unbeaten moral path.”

The church individually and those who proclaim truth to the church corporately, therefore, must put on the belt of truth if they are to withstand the attack of the enemy. When truth is no longer the message of our lives and of our churches, the church is weakened and no longer remains healthy.

**Breastplate of Righteousness.** The second piece of armor God gives to the church is the breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness is a critical component of church health on many levels. In one sense, Christians are protected from accusations of the enemy because the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to them (Rom 5:17-19). With humanity’s sinful nature and sinful actions in mind, Paul declared, “there is no one

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62 Lea, *2 Timothy*, 244.
righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10). Nevertheless, “Paul elaborated on the wonderful news that ‘this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe’ (Rom 3:22). This righteousness means that those who believe in Jesus have been acquitted of all guilt before God. They are completely forgiven and reconciled to him as friends, better yet, as sons and daughters.”63 For this reason, Paul could say to the church, “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

Satan, though, attacks the church by leading “Christians to believe otherwise. The powers strive to convince people that God could not possibly forgive them for some of the horrible things they have done in the past.”64 As Satan seeks to accuse and condemn God’s people, they can evade condemnation because they stand in God’s righteousness.

The imputation of Christ’s righteousness, however, does not give the church a license to sin. Instead, believers must make a daily decision to put on the breastplate of righteousness (6:14). Two chapters before instructing the Ephesian believers to put on the breastplate of righteousness, Paul had provided practical instruction to help those in the church live in holiness and righteousness. Specifically he instructed them to “lay aside the old self” (4:22) and “put on the new self” (4:24). Hendriksen has called this section of Paul’s letter (4:22-24),

*a summary formulation* of a tremendously tall order. In a sense, they had already put off the old man and put on the new man, namely, when they had given their hearts to Christ, and had professed him openly at the time of their baptism. But basic conversion must be followed by daily conversion. Even though in principle the believer has become a new creature (or ‘creation’), he remains a sinner until he

64Ibid.
dies. The old nature, with which the Ephesians had been on such intimate terms for so many years, is not easy to shed. Getting rid of it is difficult and painful. It amounts, in fact, to a crucifixion (Rom. 6:6). This is true all the more because it is always promising so much. It is being ‘continually corrupted’ through lusts’ illusions, those deceptive evil desires with their mighty promises and minimal performances.65

Paul wanted believers to protect themselves and the church from the corrupting influences of sin. Achieving this desired result, however, requires believers to make daily decisions that result in righteous living. That is precisely what it means to wear the breastplate of righteousness.

Feet Shod with the Gospel of Peace. Third, Paul instructed the Ephesians to “shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (6:15). It should be understood that “some scholars debate the meaning of this piece of armor, but the emphasis on standing firm in the peace of God remains clear. When we face spiritual battles, standing firm requires the right footwear.”66 Lawless has observed that, “Some scholars have understood that the footwear imagery of this piece of the armor reflects the armament of a Roman soldier, who often wore boots equipped with long nails for solid footing. The image shows that we should anchor down against the Enemy’s attacks.”67 Believers may find themselves in the midst of an intense struggle with the enemy as he attacks with temptation. Those who stand firm in resistance, however, can experience a sense of peace, in the midst of conflict, which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).

65 Hendriksen, Ephesians, 213-14, italics in original.
66 Franklin and Lawless, Spiritual Warfare, 112.
This particular piece of the armor not only teaches regarding the importance of standing firm in the battle—a defensive posture—but it also reveals the offensive nature of the church’s battle with the enemy. The language Paul uses in 6:15 echoes that of Isaiah 52:7, which reads, “How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation and says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” Lawless believes, “The connection between these verses implies that having our feet sandaled isn’t only defensive but also offensive: sharing the gospel. . . . When we are always prepared to tell somebody about Jesus, we stand against the Enemy.”  

Churches who long to be healthy must be prepared for the battle by fitting their feet with the gospel of peace. In doing so, they will stand firm against the enemy and take the good news of Jesus to those who need it—exhibiting genuine signs of a healthy church.

**Shield of Faith.** The fourth piece of armor God gives to the church is the shield of faith. Snodgrass believes the phrases before and after the introduction of this piece of armor reveal the significance of faith in the Christian life. The introductory phrase of 6:16, “in addition to all,” reveals the necessity of this piece of armor. Just as the introductory phrase reveals the necessity of faith, the concluding expression explains its function. Faith is able to “extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (6:16). Hendriksen makes an important point about the effect of faith on these flaming arrows

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68Ibid., 49.

when he writes,

In the devil’s quiver there are all kinds of fiery bolts. Paul mentions “tribulation, anguish, persecution, famine,” etc. Some of these missiles enkindle doubt, others lust, greed, vanity, envy, etc. Only by looking away from self to God Triune, placing one’s trust in him for life, death, and eternity, relying on his word of revelation and promise, is it possible to repel this shower of flaming arrows.\(^{70}\)

The individual believer and the church as a whole, then, must understand that faith is not merely salvific. Instead, it is a daily discipline that enables believers to extinguish attacks from the enemy (2 Cor 5:7; Heb 11:1-40). The church which longs to achieve greater health will not only understand the necessity of faith in daily living, but will exercise their faith in God, even when the battle is at its fiercest.

Those working in or with unhealthy churches must be especially careful not to neglect this piece of armor. When a church is unhealthy, it is easy to become discouraged and lose faith. Churches in such a predicament must have faith that God can restore them to health, even if it seems like it will take a miracle. As both the unhealthy church and the consultant press forward in faith, the likelihood of achieving greater health will increase.

**Helmet of Salvation.** The fifth piece of armor God gives to the church is the helmet of salvation. In addition to Ephesians 6:17, Paul also spoke of the helmet of salvation in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, this time describing the helmet as “the hope of salvation.” Salvation produces immense hope in the life of the believer. Paul used the term hope to communicate the idea of “confident expectation that God will accomplish

\(^{70}\)Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 278.
His will. . . . This issue is, of course, a matter of the mind—and we should not be surprised that the helmet of salvation protects the mind.” In his letter to the Romans, Paul instructed the church to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2). As those in the church renew their minds, their confidence of salvation both in the immediate battle and in the future will grow.

This piece of the armor is primarily a defensive mechanism, designed to protect the believer from seeds of doubt the enemy may plant regarding the promises of God. Hendriksen explains how critical this piece of the armor is by creating a battle-like scenario:

Were it not for the fact that in the midst of hardship and persecution the assurance of salvation both present and future dwells in his heart he might easily give up the fight. It is exactly this treasure that fortifies him with strength to continue the fight, for as to himself he knows that what God has begun in him will be carried on to completion (Psalm 138:8; Phil 1:6).  

As believers take and put on the helmet of salvation, hope for deliverance is increased and strength to continue in the battle is acquired. When believers are encouraged to persist in the midst of intense conflict with the enemy, the health of the church is improved.  

**Sword of the Spirit.** The final piece of armor God gives to the church is the sword of the Spirit. Paul introduced this piece of armor in 6:17 and in the same verse clarified that this piece is “the word of God.” Arnold has pointed out that,

Just as Jesus used Scripture to resist Satan’s temptations while he was in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11), Paul called on believers to use God’s Word to resist the devil in their own situations. This is not to be understood as a semimagical use of


72 Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 278, italics in original.
Scripture, quoting it out loud as a means of thwarting the devil. It involves gaining a thorough familiarity with Scripture and an accurate understanding of its relevance for any given situation. When Jesus was tempted, the devil applied Scripture inappropriately and out of context; Jesus responded to the devil by applying Scripture appropriately and according to its proper intent in conveying the mind of God on specific matters. The thorough, systematic study of Scripture on a regular basis is vital for all believers. It is an integral part of engaging in effective spiritual warfare.\(^{73}\)

Additionally, the sword of the Spirit teaches important truths about the spiritual struggle in which believers find themselves. First, the Word teaches that God is sovereign over the enemy (Job 1:6-12; Zech 3:1-5; Luke 22:31). Second, the Word teaches that God will eventually bind the enemy and defeat him permanently (Rev 20:1-3, 7-10).\(^{74}\) These biblical truths are designed to protect the believer from fear. God is in control of this battle and will ultimately emerge as victor.

In addition to being a defensive weapon, the sword of the Spirit is also an offensive weapon. Snodgrass has been careful to show that, “‘Word of God’ does not refer to the Bible but to the gospel message. The Greek word used here (rhema) usually refers to a teaching or prophetic utterance or, more specifically, to the gospel.”\(^{75}\) As the church engages in the task of evangelism, they offensively enter Satan’s domain and proclaim forgiveness and freedom to those in darkness (Col 1:13).\(^{76}\) The message of salvation that the church proclaims is a message rooted in Scripture—for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

\(^{73}\)Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*, 156.

\(^{74}\)Lawless, *Putting on the Armor*, 108-09.

\(^{75}\)Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 344.

\(^{76}\)Franklin and Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare*, 122.
The church that longs to be healthy must take up the sword of the Spirit. By doing so, they will not only protect themselves from sin and fear, but will also be emboldened to enter the fortified kingdom of Satan to proclaim the message of Christ’s deliverance to those in bondage.

Make Prayer a Priority

After listing the six pieces of armor, Paul immediately turned his attention to the priority of prayer. Spiritual factors that affect the health of the church involve the supernatural, both good and evil. When each piece of God’s armor is in place, the church has prepared itself for the battle, but one task remains. The church must beseech assistance from their supernatural advocate in order to defeat their supernatural adversary. This fact is what led Paul to conclude his peroratio by writing,

> With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (6:18-20).

The fact that Paul places an emphasis on the priority of prayer after the church has been instructed to put on the full armor of God is significant. The order of his instructions suggests Paul believed that “those who are wearing the full armor of God make the best prayer warriors. . . . As a prisoner for his faith, Paul wasn’t interested in the number of people praying for him, but he was in the faith of those people. He needed prayer partners who moved heaven and threatened hell.”

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77Lawless, Putting on the Armor, 134.
While prayer is not a specific piece of Paul’s armor analogy, its significance is not overstated. Paul began his letter by praying for his readers and then closed by asking his readers to pray for him. Paul saw prayer as a necessary tool that invited the church’s supernatural God to defeat the church’s supernatural enemy. When the church is equipped with the full armor of God and is seeking his protection and guidance through prayer, they become a healthy force capable of defeating the enemy.

**Focus on God at All Times**

While Ephesians 6:10-20 offers instruction for addressing spiritual factors in the pursuit of church health, the insights in the greater context of Ephesians should not be overlooked. In chapters 1-3 Paul focuses the bulk of his attention on laying a theological foundation for victory in spiritual warfare: *Believers are in Christ.* We are chosen in Him (Eph. 1:4) and have redemption through His blood (v. 7). In Him we have an inheritance (v. 10-11). We have our hope in Him and have been sealed in Him (vv.12-13). We are created in Him for good works (2:10). In Him we have been given life (1:20; 2:5-7). Through Him we have access to God (v. 18).

This summation reveals that the opening chapters of Ephesians are overwhelmingly about God rather than the enemy. If one limits his study of spiritual factors to Ephesians 6:10-20 alone, it is easier to become focused on the schemes of the devil (11), the rulers, powers, world forces of darkness, the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (12), the evil days (13), and the flaming arrows of the evil one

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79Lawless, *Discipled Warriors*, 28, italics in original.

80In addition to the opening chapters, the entire book of Ephesians, indeed, the whole Bible is overwhelmingly about God, not the enemy.
(16). Such a focus, however, is not consistent with Paul and is not a healthy approach for addressing spiritual factors.

Instead of focusing on the enemy, Paul found motivation by focusing on God whose power would assist him and other believers in their struggle with the enemy. Paul wanted believers in Ephesus, and thus contemporary believers as well, to be strong in the Lord (6:10), to fight in the strength of His might (6:10), and to wear the complete suit of armor He provides (6:11). Just as David refused to enter battle with the weapons of man (1 Sam 17:39), so Paul expected believers to rely on the weapons of God.\(^8^1\) The authors of Scripture portray the enemy as a supporting character in the warfare narrative, but in the end God is the victorious One who supplies believers with the tools they need to be winners.

Additionally, Paul wanted the church to know God thoroughly and to remain focused on Him and His grace not only in times of struggles, but rather at all times. Throughout his literature, Paul emphasized grace as he enlightened the church about their relationship with God. Lawless has observed this Pauline tendency and suggests,

Focusing on such grace has at least three benefits. First, believers who begin to understand the depth of God’s grace are less likely to boast (Eph. 2:9). Pride weakens a church’s health, producing strife and division (see 1 Corinthians 1:11-13; 3:1-4; 11:18-19). . . . Second, believers who appreciate grace resist temptation. If I view my sin as offending a holy God who died for me (Rom. 5:8), I should be willing to sin less, not more (6:1-2). Third, knowing who we are in Christ’s grace helps us ward off other attacks. Satan most often attacks with discouragement and defeat.\(^8^2\)

If Christians know who they are in Christ and focus on Him, it is easier to

\(^8^1\text{Hendriksen, Ephesians, 272.}\)

\(^8^2\text{Ibid., 33.}\)
overcome discouragement by simply remembering they are children of God (Eph 1:5), completely forgiven of sin (Rom 8:1; Col 1:14), and able to do all things through Him who gives them strength (Phil 4:13). When the church maintains this Pauline focus, they become a force that threatens the enemy.

**Practical Application**

Revitalization agents can increase attention to spiritual factors by simply assessing the spiritual dynamic in their evaluation of church health. Those interested in improving church health cannot afford to evaluate staff needs, facilities, parking, growth trends, and budgets only. Such an approach may prove to be effective in business consulting, but in church consulting it may generate recommendations that fail to address the real issue. Instead, revitalization agents must be sensitive to spiritual factors and consider that the church may be struggling, at least in part, because the enemy is attacking.

Additionally, revitalization agents should inquire about discipleship strategies that are designed to equip church members for the inevitable battle. In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul advised church leaders to be about the work of equipping “the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” Given Paul’s emphasis on spiritual power throughout the letter (1:19, 21; 3:7, 16, 18, 20; 6:10, 12), it is logical to conclude that “equipping the saints” includes preparing members to engage the powers by living in the power of Christ. Church members sent into the battle without training to

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83 One way in which revitalization agents may evaluate the spiritual dynamic in the church is to look throughout the congregation for either deeds of the flesh or fruits of the Spirit. Paul utilized this same approach in his letter to the Galatians and listed specific examples of each (Gal 5:19-23).
wear “the full armor of God” (6:11, 13) are more susceptible to attack. Those interested in church health should work with church leaders to devise a discipleship strategy that teaches members to wear “the full armor of God” (6:11, 13) as they perform the “work of service” (4:12) to which they have been called.

Finally, revitalization agents should consider that a church may be in plateau or decline because they are not involved in ministry which threatens the enemy. In fact, some have wrongly inferred in their reading of Ephesians 6:10-20 that Christians are pictured here as sitting back, as it were, waiting in the shelter of their fortress for Satan’s attack. The context (see on verses 17 and 19) does not allow this rather common interpretation. The “standing” of which Paul speaks (verses 11, 14) is not that of a brick wall that is waiting passively, as it were, for the assault of the battering ram. The soldiers referred to here are drawn up in battle array and rushing into the fight. They are both defending themselves and attacking.\(^{34}\)

It is altogether possible, then, that a church may be exhibiting signs of poor health because they are sitting idly rather than engaging in the war as they should. In these cases, the revitalization agent must be able to discern that reality and then encourage those in the church to prepare for and engage in the battle by developing an evangelistic ministry that threatens the enemy.

These examples reveal that each church is unique when it comes to spiritual factors. Some churches may be oblivious to the spiritual reality, at least in practice, while others may demonstrate an unhealthy interest in the supernatural.\(^{35}\) This reality suggests that each church will require an individualized assessment and plan for addressing spiritual factors in the pursuit of improved church health.

\(^{34}\) Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 273.

Conclusion

Those interested in revitalization ministry should consider the impact of spiritual factors. Throughout his ministry Paul dealt with the reality of spiritual factors. Those experiences equipped Paul with a thorough understanding of who the enemy is, why the enemy attacks the church, how the enemy attacks the church, and most importantly, how God provides a strategy for victory when the enemy attacks the church. Like Paul, revitalization agents today must give careful attention to spiritual factors as they work to improve the health of churches.
CHAPTER 6
APPLYING PAULINE PRINCIPLES TO REVITALIZATION MINISTRIES TODAY

Introduction

A study of Paul’s revitalization ministry is valuable, but its value is most realized when its findings are applied in revitalization ministries today. This study has produced numerous insights that can contribute to the work of revitalization agents and church leaders as they seek to improve the health of the American church. While the insights gleaned from Paul’s ministry may be many, this concluding chapter will focus on five insights that, if applied properly, will help to create positive change in American churches.

Become an Expert

This study of Paul’s revitalization ministry has revealed Paul’s commitment to being thoroughly informed regarding contextual, institutional, and spiritual factors in each church he advised. Paul not only addressed all three of these factors consistently throughout his revitalization ministry, but he also demonstrated a great deal of expertise on each factor.\(^1\) That expertise, no doubt, enhanced the church’s willingness to listen to

\(^1\)The case for Paul’s expertise on contextual, institutional, and spiritual factors was made at length over the course of chapters three, four, and five. One of the more obvious pieces of evidence that demonstrates Paul’s expertise on institutional and contextual factors was the amount of time Paul spent with most of his churches in the cities where they resided. As a reminder, Acts 18:11 reports that Paul
Paul and act upon his recommendations. If revitalization agents today are to be successful, they too will need to put in the necessary time to become experts on the context, the institution, and the spiritual factors affecting the health of a church prior to offering recommendations.

Unfortunately, studies suggest that some consultants today are not in the practice of becoming thoroughly informed regarding the community, the institution, and the spiritual factors affecting the churches they advise. In fact, consultant Will Mancini reports that churches who have used consultants and were displeased with the outcome claim the consultants were guilty of “applying a ‘cookie-cutter’ approach, showing poor presentation skills or not adequately understanding the congregation.”\(^2\) Additionally, church leaders have indicated that consultants are sometimes guilty of “repurposing old consultation reports.”\(^3\) While there are certainly similarities between churches in regard to problems they face, these approaches demonstrate an unwillingness or an inability to understand the unique situation of each church, and no doubt affects the church’s willingness to act upon the consultant’s recommendations.

Like Paul, revitalization agents must first acquire in-depth knowledge of the community. Since most consultants will not likely move to the city where the church is located, they will need to spend several months understanding the unique context of the church. Acts 20:31 reports that Paul spent eighteen months working with the church in the city of Corinth. Acts 20:31 reports that Paul spent three years working with the church in the city of Ephesus. The insight Paul gained about these churches and their contexts during that time was no doubt considerable.


\(^3\) Ibid.
located for an extended period of time, as Paul sometimes did, they must employ other strategies. Percept Demographics, for example, offers a demographic analysis that provides not only basic demographic trends, but psychographic, praxiographic, and mediagraphic trends.\(^4\) Such an analysis will help both the consultant and church leaders better understand “how the community ‘thinks,’ what worship styles it prefers, what needs it expresses, and what type of church it seeks.”\(^5\)

Revitalization agents can also increase their knowledge of the community by interviewing community leaders, reading local newspapers, and by studying the history of a community. While revitalization agents today may never know as much about contextual factors as Paul did, they can be thorough in their research and seek to understand contextual factors that may affect the health of the churches they advise.

Second, revitalization agents must acquire an in-depth knowledge of the church itself. Consultation authority Lyle Schaller is so convinced of the need to thoroughly understand the institution that he believes the most important question a consultant should ask is, “Where am I?”\(^6\) Schaller’s goal in asking this question is to discover “the four or five most distinctive characteristics that will help me identify why

\(^4\)Percept Group, “Percept Products for Churches” (Rancho Santa Margarita, CA) available online at http://www.perceptgroup.com/. Other resources to be used for the purpose of demographic analysis are Freedemographics.com, as well as the U.S. Census, which can be accessed at http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en.


\(^6\)Lyle Schaller, The Interventionist (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 36.
this church is different from every other congregation I have ever visited.” In his article, “The Process of Church Consulting,” Tim Woodruff, likewise, believes that for a consultation to be successful, the consultant should develop a thorough knowledge base regarding “the history of the church, the prevailing philosophy of leadership, theological leanings, sacred cows, successful or struggling ministries, mission and vision, etc.

Conversations on these subjects provide vital background information for the consulting process.”

Again, while revitalization agents today may not be as knowledgeable as Paul was on institutional issues (after all, in some cases he was the founding pastor), they can learn much about the churches which they advise. The agents can ask members to complete a church health survey that measures how they perceive the health of their church. Revitalization agents can conduct interviews with staff, key leaders, and lay people alike. Revitalization agents may pose as visitors in an attempt to evaluate worship services and small group classes. When revitalization agents today take the time to truly

7Ibid.


9A church health survey can measure how members believe the church is doing in areas such as worship, prayer, evangelism, ministry, discipleship, and fellowship. As leaders discover the perception of the congregation they can begin to evaluate if the perception is valid. If the perception is valid, improvements in those areas can be made. If the perception is not valid, church leaders can draw attention to some of the positive results recently achieved in those areas. The following links provide examples of surveys that are available today. A survey offered by Church Central can be found at: http://www.churchcentral.com/whitepapers/3169/Church-Health-Survey-Questionnaire; Leadership Transformations, Inc. offers a survey that can be accessed at: http://www.healthychurch.net/; LifeWay Christian Resources also offers a survey called the Transformational Church Assessment Tool, a survey which can be accessed at: http://www.lifeway.com/c/Keyword-transformational+church+assessment/N-?D=transformational+church+assessment&Dx=mode%2Bmatchall&Ntk=Keyword.
understand the churches they advise, they will be better prepared to make credible recommendations.

Third, revitalization agents must not overlook the issue of spiritual factors that affect the health of the church. Paul’s letters contain no shortage of insight regarding the spiritual realm in which the church conducts its work (Eph 2:1-3, 6:10-20; 2 Cor 4:3-4; Col 1:13-14). Too few consultants today, however, address spiritual factors. One reason spiritual factors may be neglected is because of the difficulty in measuring this type of factor. While quantifying spiritual factors may be difficult, it remains necessary to give these factors the attention they deserve. Through small groups and personal discipleship, these factors can be addressed so the health of the church may improve.

Instead of helping the church think about spiritual factors, some consultants advise churches from a business mentality. While it is helpful to examine growth trends, tweak budgets, evaluate staffing needs, and measure facilities, more is needed. Revitalization agents can get all of these issues right and the church remain unhealthy because the spiritual element has not been addressed. The staff may be doing ministry in their own power. Prayer may be a forgotten purpose of the church. Members of the church may quench the Spirit of God (1 Thess 5:19) by holding on to sin in their lives. Problems such as these, if not addressed, will hinder the growth and health of the church, even if the church is demonstrably healthy in regard to contextual and institutional factors. Revitalization agents must, therefore, be diligent in their attempts to understand and speak to spiritual matters.
Diagnose the Problem

Diagnostics is an important part of revitalization ministry. In fact, revitalization ministry begins with identifying problems or issues which are compromising, or have the potential to compromise, the health of the church. Woodruff speaks to the significance of properly pinpointing the issues that demand the greatest attention:

One of the most important aspects of the consulting process is reaching agreement on where to focus attention and effort. Churches—like people—are complicated organisms with a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and problems. The consulting relationship cannot address every issue facing a particular congregation at a particular time. In fact, the more specific and defined the issues are, the more likely it is that consulting will work. Narrowing the focus of the consulting relationship to a few specific issues requires much prayer, dialogue, and discernment. Narrowing focus to the right issues requires wisdom, honesty, and an instinct for the spiritually central.10

Throughout Paul’s ministry, this diagnosis was typically completed in one of three ways. The most common way was a church representative who provided Paul with a report regarding the health of the church. In cases like these, Paul depended on someone else’s perception of reality and trusted his ability to describe the problem properly. In other cases the evidence suggests that Paul personally diagnosed the health of the church and pinpointed problems of which the church needed to be aware. Finally, other examples exist of Paul speaking to potential problems that could threaten the health of the church. Since the problems had yet to manifest in these cases, the diagnosis differed, but the need for attention remained in order to protect the health of the church from unnecessary damage.

Responding to the Diagnosis of Others

Evidences of the first approach—a church representative providing information for Paul—are common in Paul’s letters. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expressed concern over the danger of falling into theological error (3:1-4:1), while also speaking to the threat of disunity, particularly between Syntyche and Euodia (4:2). It is unlikely, however, that Paul was the one to diagnose these problems. Instead, Paul seems to have relied on a report regarding the health of the church that he likely received from Epaphroditus (2:25). 11

Likewise, when he wrote to the Colossians, Paul warned against the threat of captivating teachings comprised of “philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men” (2:8). Again, Paul does not seem to have identified this threat himself, but was instead expressing his concern because of the report he has received from Epaphras (1:8). Epaphras, or possibly someone else closely associated with the church in Colossae, was the likely diagnostician in this case. 12

11 Peter O’Brien, The Epistle to the Philippians, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 332. O’Brien has observed that Epaphroditus was “called an ‘envoy’ of the Philippians (umon . . . apostolos). Although this term of respect frequently described those who had been commissioned by the risen Lord Jesus as his authoritative representatives (including Paul himself: Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 9:1, 2; 2 Cor 1:1; and esp. Gal 1:15-17), apostolos was also used of ‘the messengers of the churches’ (2 Cor 8:23), that is, those envoys commissioned by the congregations for specific purposes.” As a messenger of the church, Epaphroditus likely brought Paul a report regarding the health of the Philippian church, as well as a gift of financial support.

12 A. Skevington Wood, Ephesians, in vol. 11 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 16. Wood has argued that, “From time to time he would also receive messengers from the churches beyond Rome. One of these was Epaphras, whom Paul addressed as his companion in the service of Christ and in his captivity (Col 1:7; 4:12; Philm 23). It seems that it was he who was instrumental in evangelizing the Lycus Valley region at Paul’s instigation during the Ephesian mission and who founded the churches in Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. Epaphras came to Rome to bring Paul a progress report about these congregations.”
Additionally, in his letter to the church in Galatia Paul articulated his concern that the Galatians had exchanged an accurate understanding of the gospel for a false gospel (1:7). It is unclear how Paul learned of the false gospel being preached to the Galatians. The letter contains no mention of an emissary. Textual evidence does, however, suggest that Paul was not the diagnostian in this particular case.\textsuperscript{13}

Paul’s work among the Corinthians also exemplifies the idea that he operated from the diagnosis of others who were intimately familiar with the church. In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul disclosed this fact by writing, “For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you.” The church was divided, some expressing allegiance to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Cephas, and some to Christ (1:12). Paul’s absence from Corinth at the time the problem emerged made it impossible to know about the problem personally. Therefore, he learned from other individuals about the problem that demanded his attention.

Just as Paul utilized others in the process of diagnosing a church’s health, so revitalization agents today should look for opportunities to do the same. A revitalization agent can learn a great deal about a church simply by listening to others. The pastor, staff members, lay leaders, and even newcomers can share their perspectives, which may lead to positive change. While this approach is debatable, consultants may also choose to interview persons who have recently left the church.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13}F. F. Bruce, \textit{The Epistles to the Galatians}, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 19. In his commentary on Galatians, Bruce speaks of Paul as “receiving news” regarding the problem in Galatia.

\textsuperscript{14}Consultants who choose this approach should first inform—if not get permission from—the current pastor.
Unfortunately, revitalization agents may not always have pre-existing relationships that can ensure confidence in the trustworthiness of the source offering input. In such cases, revitalization agents should acquire input from multiple individuals closely associated with the church, looking for recurring themes or patterns. The more frequently an issue is mentioned, the more likely the issue requires attention in the pursuit of church health.

Revitalization agents or church leaders can conduct interviews, distribute questionnaires via email, or ask members to fill out an anonymous survey. Some questions to use in the diagnosis process may include: Is the church’s teaching based on the Bible? Is the church a praying church? Is the church reaching non-believers? Does the church have an established discipleship plan to assist new believers in their walk with Christ? Is the church keeping the new believers who join? Is the church both locally and globally minded? Does the church have a strategic plan for future growth? Are the leaders committed to the ministry of the church? While this list is not exhaustive, it does contain questions which will likely assist church leaders in pinpointing areas where improvement is needed.¹⁵

Learning about the Problem Personally

Paul’s work among the Corinthians, however, also suggests that he may have diagnosed other issues within the church personally. In 2 Corinthians 13:1, Paul declared that he was making preparations to visit the church for a third time. In 13:2 he added, “I

have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone.” Paul’s words indicate that when he was present with them during his second visit, he diagnosed certain sins that required repentance. While it is not clear what those sins were, what is clear is that Paul personally diagnosed these problems during his time with the church. He believed these issues were destructive to the health of the church and needed to be resolved once and for all.

**Offering Preventive Health Care**

Other cases suggest that Paul was directly involved in diagnosing potential problems which could compromise the health of the church—that is, in preventive care. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul discussed the threat of persecution on the young church since his departure (1 Thess 3:1-5). In a sense, Paul could be considered the diagnostician considering he had warned the church of the inevitability of persecution prior to his departure (1 Thess 3:4). Additionally, however, Paul also depended upon the report he had received from Timothy (1 Thess 3:6). While Paul and Timothy worked together to diagnose and confirm the impending threat persecution posed to the church, Paul warned the church of the danger and in doing so brought the church’s attention to this important matter of church health.

Additionally, in his letter to those in Ephesus, Paul instructed believers to prepare for attack from their spiritual enemy (Eph 6:10-13) who longed to see the church

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16 David Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 541. Garland acknowledges that Paul could have learned about the sin in Corinth and then
crippled and ineffective. The letter itself contains no evidence that Paul had received a report about the church in Ephesus from an emissary or church representative. This fact, coupled with the “situationless”\(^\text{17}\) nature of Paul’s letter, seems to indicate that Paul was not writing in response to a report he had received, but was instead writing to simply inform and encourage these believers in their walk with Christ. In this case, it appears as though Paul was the one most aware of the continual threat of attack from the spiritual enemy.

Diagnostics were clearly an important part of Paul’s revitalization ministry and must continue to be a part of revitalization ministries today. Schaller speaks of the need to identify the right issues, but further emphasizes the need to narrow the focus of the consulting endeavor. He makes this point well in his book, *The Interventionist*, when he demands an answer to the ever-important question:

> What is the central issue here? The most common answer among congregations on a plateau in size or shrinking in numbers is the absence of a clear central focal point for ministry. . . . This absence of clarity on role or lack of focus makes it difficult to order priorities in the allocation of sacred priorities including the pastor’s time. . . . Without a clear definition of that central issue, it is difficult to formulate recommended courses of action.\(^\text{18}\)

Likewise, the consultant must be careful to keep the church focused on the central issue in the revitalization process. A common temptation among consultants “is to overload the congregation with two or three dozen recommendations. If the goal of the

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\(^\text{17}\) John Polhill, *Paul & His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 358.

\(^\text{18}\) Schaller, *The Interventionist*, 50-51.
outside interventionist is to make a difference, it may be wiser to keep that list to a couple of major recommendations.”

If revitalization ministries are to be effective, the revitalization agent and church leaders must be able to identify issues that corrupt the health of the church. Equally important, however, is the need to identify those problems that are a manageable undertaking for those involved in the revitalization process. If the target objective is too narrow, minimal results will be achieved. If the target objective is too broad, a lack of resources may hinder success. Proper diagnosis, therefore, is a critical step in the revitalization process.

Like Paul, those interested in church health should think and speak in terms of contextual factors, institutional factors, and spiritual factors in their diagnosis. This approach will push church leaders to consider those factors they cannot control (contextual factors), as well as those factors they can control (institutional factors), while not neglecting the spiritual dynamic that can be easily overlooked. Pinpointing one or two issues in each category will give the church and its leaders a manageable task that can lead to improved health.

**Prescribe a Solution**

Once problems have been identified and a central focus has been established, it is necessary to proceed to prescription. Woodruff, for example, suggests that “all this talk and diagnosis must result in a prescription that will effectively address the issues facing a church: a specific ‘solution’ to how we handle this situation or take advantage of

\footnote{Ibid., 51.}
that particular opportunity or resolve a threatening conflict.”

Paul’s ministry was marked both by diagnosing health related issues and by offering remedies to those unhealthy situations within the church.

For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warned the church against the threat of attack from a spiritual enemy. Specifically, he wrote, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). If Paul had concluded with an identification of the threat alone, the church might have been paralyzed with fear of this terrifying reality—especially in a culture already dominated by fear of the powers. Paul, however, did not end with a warning only. Over the next five verses Paul prescribed solutions to the problem facing the Ephesians. Specifically, he instructed the Ephesian believers to “take up the full armor of God” (6:13) and then listed each piece of the armor by name. As the Ephesians implemented Paul’s prescribed solution, they would not only experience protection from their enemy, but they would also be equipped to live in victory over their enemy.

Another threat that plagued Paul’s churches was the threat of false teaching. While many churches encountered this danger, the church of Galatia seems to have

20Woodruff, “The Process of Church Consulting.”

21Clinton Arnold, Powers of Darkness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 19. Arnold writes about the first-century culture in which Paul ministered, noting, “The belief in spirits crossed all religious, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. The Jews, Greeks, Romans, Asians, and Egyptians all believed in spirits who populated the heavens, the underworld and the earth. Many were thought to be good spirits, or gods, who were worthy of worship and could be trusted. Others caused people to tremble in fear because they were believed to be wicked and injurious. Everyone, however, agreed on one thing: The supernatural realm exercises control over everyday life and eternal destiny.”
suffered the most harm in this particular area. The Galatians had some in their midst who were proclaiming a false gospel (1:7). Paul expressed his concern, writing, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel” (1:6).

After diagnosing their problem, Paul began to address the harmed church with scripturally-based argumentation. Drake Williams explains,

Paul uses Scripture to argue with opponents from very different backgrounds. In Galatians he argues with people who come from a Jewish background. In the main body of his argument Paul appeals to Scripture in Galatians 3:6-14 to correct the false understanding of his Jewish opponents with respect to Abraham and his descendants. He cites an overwhelming number of texts to correct their view regarding membership in God’s family (cf. Gen. 15: in Gal. 3:6; Gen. 12:3; 18:18 in Gal. 3:8; Hab. 2:4 in Gal. 3:11; Lev. 18:5 in Gal. 3:12; Deut. 27:26 in Gal. 3:13). He refers to the promise that God gave Abraham in Genesis 13:15; 17:18; and 24:7 in Galatians 3:16. He appeals to a scriptural allegory at the end of his main argument in Galatians 3-4. He cites Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:27 and Genesis 21:10 in Galatians 4:30. Furthermore, a large number of scriptural echoes are found within the body of Galatians. . . . In confronting his opponents who have been influenced by Jewish thinking, Paul uses the Scriptures and scripturally based argumentation to a large extent to correct their ways.²²

Paul dealt with the false teachers by utilizing the truth of God’s Word in a contextualized way. He expected his readers to measure the claims of false teachers against the authoritative Scriptures he so often quoted, and by doing so, to become persuaded of the truth. By reminding the church of the truth conveyed throughout Scripture, Paul prescribed a solution that, if implemented, would protect the church from the danger of false teachers.

In other letters, Paul prescribed a solution to the threat of false teachers where trusted men would act as defenders of the truth. For example, as Paul’s representative, Timothy was charged with “securing the order of the churches and integrity of their teaching. He is to confront the false teaching by holding true to his calling in waging the ‘good warfare’ (1:3, 18). He is responsible for promoting sound teaching (4:6; 6:2b) and the orderly performance of public worship” (4:11-16). Likewise, Paul expected Titus to deal with those “who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain” (1:11). As trusted leaders in the church implemented Paul’s prescribed solutions and silenced those who promoted false doctrine, the health of the church would improve.

Another threat that plagued many of Paul’s churches was the threat of immorality. Schreiner, for example, has observed that “Paul gives specific and concrete parenesis to people in his churches, instructing them not to get divorced (1 Cor 7:10-16) and to refrain from sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:12-20; 1 Thess 4:3-8). He admonishes the idle to get to work (2 Thess 3:6-13). A man committing incest must be disciplined (1 Cor 5:1-13).” Schreiner’s examples demonstrate Paul’s use of parenesis which included specific instruction that served to guide the church to greater degrees of holiness.

After prescribing solutions, Paul engaged in follow-up work with the churches he advised. He did not utilize a “hit and run” approach. Instead, he worked continually with the church to see if the proposed solution was being implemented and proving

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effective in restoring the church to health. The clearest example of Paul’s follow-up work is in the church of Corinth. Paul sent multiple letters to this church and made multiple visits in an attempt to achieve the desired outcome (2 Cor 13:1-2). Paul’s follow-up work demonstrates the need to prescribe solutions and evaluate their effectiveness at achieving church health.

While the steps of prescribing solutions and following up in the process may seem obvious, they are not necessarily simple. After all, there is a reason church leaders are soliciting outside expertise and assistance: they have been unable to discover the right solution on their own. Alan Chandler has noted that making the right recommendation “can go wrong more than you think. Doctors must wrestle with all the facts before prescribing medications to their patients. Likewise, church consultants must prayerfully process a vast number of details to make recommendations inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

Thus, as Paul prayed on behalf of the churches he advised (Rom 10:1; 2 Cor 13:7-9; Eph 1:15-23; Phil 1:3-6, 9-11; Col 1:13-14; 1 Thess 1:2-3), so those interested in revitalization ministry today should begin with prayer. Revitalization agents who rush this step of the process, fail to pray before making recommendations, or who recycle recommendations from church to church will unlikely see positive results come to fruition.

If the diagnosis is expressed in terms of contextual factors, institutional factors, and spiritual factors, then the proposed solutions should be expressed likewise. For example, one may discover in the diagnostic process that the community surrounding the

church is experiencing a changing demographic. In such a case, revitalization agents must speak to this contextual diagnosis in terms of a contextual solution. The recommendation may be to hire a staff member from the demographic of those in the surrounding community or to begin new ministries that will meet the needs of those moving into the area.

If the diagnosis pertains to an institutional issue, the proposed solution should be presented as an institutional solution. For example, a church may reach a plateau in their growth due to a lack of space. In such cases, church leaders should evaluate their facilities to determine if room for growth exists. Church leaders should be careful to examine more than space availability in the worship center. Room may exist in the worship center, while the parking lot or classroom space for small groups may have exceeded capacity. Church leaders can determine if new construction is needed or if additional service times will create the necessary space for growth.

Finally, if the diagnosis reveals that spiritual issues are a cause of poor health, then improving the spiritual condition must be at the center of the solution. A church may, for example, have a large number of new believers who lack depth in their relationship with Christ. Church leaders may respond with new discipleship strategies that help develop maturity within the congregation. Strategies may include developing a “College of Discipleship” to lead new believers from basic doctrines of the Christian faith to a more mature understanding of theology, providing small group studies that offer biblical insight into specific issues which hinder maturity within the congregation, and utilizing mentoring relationships where disciples can be built in a more personal setting.
Regardless of the chosen strategy, the proposed solution must address the specific spiritual factor which hinders the health of the church.

Utilizing these categories will help to ensure that the real issues are addressed, rather than church leaders launching new strategies that fail to confront the problem in a direct and effective fashion. This recommended approach is not designed to place blame, but to ensure that the real problem which is corrupting the health of the church is addressed.

**Utilize a Proactive Approach**

One of the more surprising insights gleaned from this study was the preventive nature of Paul’s revitalization ministry. Chapter two noted that of the churches Paul advised, textual evidence showed that five of his congregations exhibited no glaring signs of poor health. First, Paul’s letter to the Philippians addressed no problems that threatened the church’s progress. Instead, the warnings Paul provided were “of a cautionary and preventive nature that are always in order.”\(^{26}\) Second, Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians expressed Paul’s confidence in this congregation that prompted him to hold them up as “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1 Thess 1:7). Third, Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus was somewhat general in nature. No opponents were mentioned, and no overt issue seemed to corrupt the health of the church.\(^{27}\)


Fourth, the letter to the church in Rome was a letter Paul penned to defend his understanding of the gospel and to solicit support for his missionary endeavor to Spain. The fact that Paul saw the church in Rome as a capable ministry partner suggests that the church was at least healthy enough to have a meaningful ministry impact. Finally, Paul’s letter to the church in Colosse utilized future-tense language to warn of a potential threat posed by false teachers. 28 In each case, Paul utilized a proactive approach to protect the health of the church.

While Paul employed a reactive approach to church health when the situation demanded it, the more common approach he utilized was a proactive approach. In fact, in most of the churches Paul advised (Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica), evidence suggests that he wrote in response to reports he had received to warn of impending threats that had not yet corrupted the health of the church to a serious degree. Paul did not wait for churches to grossly deteriorate in health before getting involved. Yet, that is precisely what appears to be the case with churches today.

For example, in The 2010 Church Consulting Future Trends Report, Mancini reported that 49 percent of pastors claimed they would seek a consultant if they needed a new vision for their church; 25 percent if there was irresolvable conflict within the congregation; 24 percent if the church experienced a decline in attendance; 23 percent if there was a perceived decline in the overall spiritual growth of members; 22 percent if

assistance was needed in launching new ministries; and 22 percent if constructing new space was required.\textsuperscript{29}

These findings yield at least two significant insights about pastors and their willingness to work with consultants. First, Mancini’s study discovered that a majority of pastors would not seek outside assistance for any of the reasons listed above. Of the 49 percent of pastors who said they had not worked with a church consultant, the top two reasons given were, “Consulting had not yet achieved widespread acceptance” and “cost.”\textsuperscript{30} These facts demonstrate the reluctance church leaders have in utilizing an outside expert to achieve or maintain church health.

This message is one that revitalization agents need to hear. In order for churches to utilize an agent’s services, adjustments need to be made. Modeling Paul, those involved in revitalization ministry should consider ways to make their services available at little or no cost to churches to avoid being a financial burden to the church (1 Thess 2:9). It would be wise for revitalization agents to partner with denominational agencies who can bear the financial burden to strengthen the health of churches within the denomination. Working within a denomination may also grant revitalization agents the same inroad that Paul enjoyed as a church planter. Additionally, denominational agencies could train their leaders to do the work of revitalization ministry.

Second, this study reveals that those pastors who are open to outside assistance are more prone to seek assistance only after the church has become stagnant or unhealthy.

\textsuperscript{29}Mancini, “The 2010 Church Consulting Future Trends Report.”

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
The fact that the top motivations for utilizing a consultant’s services were “need for a new church vision,” “irresolvable conflict within the congregation,” “decline in attendance,” and “decline in overall perceived spiritual health/growth of members” makes this point clear. Yet, if Paul often conducted his work before the health of the church was seriously compromised, as was the case in Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica, the same should be true of churches today.

A good time to consider the implementation of the proactive approach, for example, might be within one year after a new construction project has been completed. A church may experience growth to the point of needing new space. Church leaders develop a vision for new facilities that will accommodate those who attend, while also providing room for future growth. As the new construction is completed, the church moves into the new facility and enjoys the completion of what has often been a major

31See also Aubrey Malphurs, “Five Reasons Why Using a Church Consultant is a Good Investment for Your Ministry,” The Malphurs Group (2010) [on-line]; accessed 12 July 2011; available from http://www.malphursgroup.com/images/PDFs/FiveReasons.pdf; Internet. The fact that church leaders typically refrain from seeking assistance until the health of their church has been seriously compromised is also evident from the way some of the leading church consultants in America market their services. For example, in his article, “Five Reasons Why Using a Church Consultant is a Good Investment for Your Ministry,” Aubrey Malphurs begins with the question, “Ever struggle with the idea of bringing in someone as a ministry consultant when you know that your [sic] ‘in over your head?’” That Malphurs’ target audience is church leaders who feel as though they have lost control of their ministries suggests that unhealthy conditions already exist. This reality is unfortunate, both for the leader of the church and the church itself. Bill Easum, “The Importance of a Church Consultant/Coach” Religious Product News (May 2011) [Enewsletter on-line]; accessed 17 July 2011; available from http://www.religiousproductnews.com/articles/2011-May/eNewsletter/The-Importance-of-a-Church-Consultant-Coach.htm; Internet. Likewise, Bill Easum, president of 21st Century Strategies, asks the question, “When might a church need a consultant or coach?” To that question, Easum answers, “If your church isn’t reaching its potential and you feel like something is wrong or needs to be tweaked or you are passionately looking for more ways to transform your community, it’s time to call in a consultant/coach who can help you make God’s dream come true in your church.” Easum, like Malphurs, implies that consulting is primarily, if not solely, for those church leaders who have churches that are failing to reach their potential or have something wrong, big or small, that needs to be fixed. Even his more positive phrase, “looking for more ways to transform your community” suggests that current attempts at community transformation have not been effective. One would assume that consultants today would market themselves as broadly as possible—to healthy and unhealthy churches alike.
undertaking. In some cases, the new facility even attracts new visitors, and growth continues for a period of time.

Unfortunately, church leaders are often so caught up in completing the project that they fail to pray for and develop a new vision. At this point, the church is in danger of living off past successes and becoming comfortable in their new place of worship. If this danger becomes a reality, the church may develop unhealthy habits and experience plateau in growth, even though they have just completed construction on new facilities to allow for future growth. It becomes critical for church leaders to rekindle the vision. Church leaders can utilize a consultant’s services to help them through this rekindling process and ensure that the investment made on new construction was not in vain.

Conduct Ministry in Love

A final insight gleaned from this study reveals that Paul’s revitalization ministry was marked by love. Throughout his ministry, Paul consistently spoke of his love (Rom 9:3; 2 Cor 11:11; 1 Thess 2:8) and tangibly demonstrated his love for the community, for the church, and for God. If revitalization agents today are to be successful, they too must be driven by a genuine love that is tangibly expressed to the community, to the church, and to God.

First, Paul had a genuine love for the communities in which his churches ministered. As this study has shown, Paul likely developed a genuine love for those in the community during his service as a church planter. Paul’s love was motivated by his

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understanding of their lostness (2 Cor 4:4). Consequently, Paul was willing to be
“afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but
not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying
of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Cor 4:8-10).

Paul’s love for the lost created in him not only a willingness to endure
hardship, but also a willingness to pray, for only God can change the human heart.
Likewise, revitalization agents today must be driven by a genuine love for the lost in the
community. When revitalization agents have ministries marked by a genuine love for the
lost, they will be driven to pinpoint workable solutions to equip the church to fulfill the
Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). Like Paul, they will not be deterred because they
understand that souls are at stake. They will know that what they do in assisting the
Lord’s church has eternal significance.

Second, this study has shown that Paul loved not only the community, but he
also loved the churches with whom he worked (2 Cor 11:11; 1 Thess 2:8). Paul’s love
for the church was evident in both word and deed, and stemmed directly from the
relationship he had established with his churches. As was the case with Paul,
revitalization agents too must understand that “Consulting is not an event, it is a
relationship, a conversation, an interactive and evolving collaboration. Understanding
this is critical to the success of the consulting relationship.”

When revitalization agents embrace the relational aspect of their ministries, it
will transform their work and their churches. Genuine love for the church will compel

33Woodruff, “The Process of Church Consulting”.

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revitalization agents to conduct their work with excellence. It will alter the way they work with and relate to pastors, who are God’s undershepherds for His church (1 Pet 5:1-4). It will even cause them to grieve with hurting church members. Consequently, the church will see the loving sacrifices made on their behalf and will likely respond with greater acceptance of recommendations and implementation.

Finally, Paul’s revitalization ministry was marked by a love for God. As revitalization agents work with churches today, their work cannot be simple business transactions. The revitalization agent is first a Christian. Consultants must conduct themselves in such a manner that they could say like Paul, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). The work must be conducted in such a way that pleases God and evokes His blessing.

Paul conducted his ministry in love, and revitalization agents today must do the same. Church leaders and members who are part of a church that is exhibiting poor signs of health are often sensitive or even emotional about the state of their church. Revitalization agents must be careful to conduct their ministries in love. Love can be expressed by praying with those who participate in the interview process, taking the time to listen attentively to individual concerns, and being careful to speak the truth in love in both oral and written reports.

Just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, so revitalization agents today must remember, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). As revitalization agents seek to glorify God with their ministries, they will evoke God’s blessing, and churches will be healthier.
Conclusion

The research conducted for this dissertation has recognized a grave problem the church in America is unhealthy. Conditions have deteriorated to the point that, “almost all of the data indicates that the church is fated to decline in influence every year in the near future.” American churches still have much, though, that can be leveraged for the advancement of God’s kingdom, such as human resources, physical resources, and financial resources. Moreover, those concerned with the health of the American church must not forget the power of God and the truth that Jesus said he would build His church (Matt 16:18). To ignore the potential of existing churches would be a tragic mistake with eternal consequences.

While the state of the church in America is sobering, it is not without hope, however. God has not left the American church without direction. Paul’s writings provide insights to improve the health of our churches today. As church leaders and revitalization agents apply these insights, anemic churches can once again become forces of influence for the kingdom of God.

\[34\]David Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 185.
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ABSTRACT

CHURCH REVITALIZATION: INSIGHTS FROM THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011
Chair: Dr. Charles E. Lawless, Jr.

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic by examining the current health of the American church. After establishing that the majority of American churches today are indeed unhealthy, a case is made for the need to develop a revitalization strategy to improve the health of these churches. This chapter argues that the apostle Paul was interested in church health and pinpointed three sets of factors which he consistently addressed in his work with churches.

Chapter 2 begins by recognizing that Paul used both a proactive and a reactive approach to church health in his work with New Testament churches. The chapter then examines the role Paul played in assisting churches, highlighting attributes which can and cannot be reproduced by revitalization agents today.

Chapter 3 is a study of contextual factors which affect the health of the local church. After defining and explaining contextual factors, the chapter examines Paul’s strategy for dealing with these factors that threatened the health of the churches with whom he worked.

Chapter 4 addresses institutional factors which also contribute to the health of the local church. In this chapter, the concept of institutional factors is defined and
explained. The chapter then examines Paul’s letters to understand his strategy for addressing institutional factors to improve church health.

Chapter 5 then focuses on spiritual factors which are also influential in regard to matters of church health. This chapter reveals that, unlike contextual and institutional factors that church leaders and consultants commonly address today, spiritual factors are often ignored. This chapter extracts Paul’s strategy for addressing spiritual factors.

Chapter 6 seeks to answer the practical research question of this study: how might a Pauline approach to improving church health be applied today? This chapter emphasizes the need for revitalization agents and church leaders to evaluate their approaches through a biblical lens as they work to improve church health and increase effectiveness.
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