

The Work Missionaries Do: Itinerant Church-Planting

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Local churches send missionaries out to *do* something. In the seminal passage on local church *sending* in the New Testament, the church in Antioch sends out Saul and Barnabas to do “the *work* to which” the Holy Spirit had called them (Acts 13:2). What was that work they were to do? The remainder of Chapters 13 and 14 reveal their work was making disciples of the nations through ground-breaking, itinerant church planting.

The Book of Acts shows that this *work* was not restricted to Saul and Barnabas or to their first missionary journey in Acts 13-14. Several different disciples, across different contexts, are pictured undertaking this *work*. Furthermore, in his letters Paul frames and commends this *work* as he and other coworkers carry it out.¹ Exegetically, then, the *work* emerges from these narrative accounts of Acts and the epistolary comments of Paul. Where we see missionary workers in Acts following repeated patterns of Gospel ministry and where we hear Paul in his letters commend those practices, we’ve found the outlines of this missionary *work*.² This New Testament picture of

¹ See Schnabel’s comments on a “paradigmatic” reading of Paul’s statements about the missionary task. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 376-7.

² This hermeneutical approach of looking for repeated patterns in Acts follows the IMB Foundations guidelines on interpreting Acts: “The more frequent an exemplary pattern

workers going out from churches to do ground-breaking, itinerant church planting, serves as the prototype for the modern-day missionary pattern of the people of God.³

The Work Revealed in Acts

In Acts 13:4, after the commissioning in Antioch, Saul and Barnabas travel from place to place carrying out the work they'd been sent to do. In Acts 14:21-23, toward the end of their journey, Luke captures a summary snapshot of their ministry activities, and in doing so helps to define the general outlines of the *work*. When they arrive in Derbe, Saul (now called Paul) and Barnabas “preached the gospel to that city and . . . made many disciples” (Acts 14:21a). They then returned to the cities where they had previously worked, “strengthening the souls of the disciples” (Acts 14:22). Finally, “when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:23). Luke’s summary account of their work in verses 21-23 provides a snapshot of the work they had done previously in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. In each place they had preached the Gospel, made disciples, planted churches that needed elders, and then appointed those elders. Their final step was to depart that region and return to Syrian Antioch.

When they return to Antioch, Luke makes the rather remarkable statement that they returned to Antioch, “where they had been commended to the grace of God for the *work that they had fulfilled*” (Acts 14:26; author’s emphasis). What had they done to *fulfill* (or complete) the work the Spirit had sent them to do? They had gone to new places (Salamis, Perga, Antioch

of behavior is found in the Book of Acts, the more instructive weight it should carry with us.” IMB, *Foundations*, v. 4 (2022), 156.

³ For a fuller defense of the assumptive hermeneutical approach of this article—that modern missionaries should emulate Paul—see David Paul, “Validating Pauline Emulation as a Missiological Hermeneutic in Second Timothy,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 22.2 (2023): 61-79.

in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe), preached the Gospel, disciplined and encouraged believers, started churches, appointed elders in those churches, and then moved on. This work was *fulfilled* to the point that they could leave those churches and return to the church that had sent them out. The *work* (to *ergon*), given by the Holy Spirit in 13:2 and then recurring in the summary statement in 14:26, functions as a narrative envelope, wrapping together the account of their ministry in Chapters 13 and 14.⁴

What is the significance of this account of the *work* in Acts 13 and 14? Does it carry weight beyond the first missionary journey as an indicator of a more broadly applicable missionary pattern? While it is true that Luke uses the term *work* only once more in Acts, in a reference back to the first journey (Acts 15:38), the record of Paul and his coworkers' ministry throughout Acts 16-21 shows that—though the word was not used—the pattern of the *work* was at the core of their missionary efforts.

The second and third journeys follow the same basic outline as the first: Paul and his team set out from Antioch, enter new places, preach the Gospel, make disciples, establish churches, and move on. Paul and his companions followed this pattern in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), Corinth (Acts 18:1-16), and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-41). The *work* they did throughout Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia followed the pattern of ground-breaking, itinerant church planting shown in Acts 13 and 14.

But what about the missionary efforts of others in Acts? Was this itinerant pattern simply a feature of Paul's unique apostolic calling or did others follow it as well? When the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom scattered God's people from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-3), the missionary work of the people of God began in earnest. As "those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4), their pattern of *work* previewed the path that Paul would later follow.

⁴ Robert C. Tannenhill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Vol. 2: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 181-82.

Philip, the first worker mentioned after the scattering, did the *work* in “all the towns” of Samaria (Acts 8:40). The people of the city of Samaria, “when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. . . were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12). Peter and John, having come from Jerusalem to witness the Samaritan work, were also “preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:25). Throughout Samaria, then, not just Philip but also Peter and John went from town to town, breaking new ground with the Gospel message, so that “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied (Acts 9:31).”

Acts 10 shows that Peter did the *work* among Cornelius and his household in Caesarea. As Peter preached, “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word,” and “he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:44b,46a). Afterward, as word spread of God’s work among the Gentiles, Peter returned to Jerusalem to testify that God’s salvation was for the Gentiles also (Acts 11:1-18).⁵ Peter’s first recorded missionary encounters—in Samaria and in Caesarea—both follow the general outline of ground-breaking, itinerant church-planting *work*.

Anonymous believers from Jerusalem also undertook the *work* when, according to Acts 11:20, they traveled to Antioch and “spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.” The result was that “a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). Barnabas recruits Saul to help this fledgling church, and “For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people” (Acts 11:26b). This is, of course, the Antioch church from which Saul and Barnabas would later be commissioned. In this case, unnamed believers, scattered by persecution, had done the ground-breaking

⁵ Paul later greets the church in Caesarea on his way to Antioch after the 2nd journey (Acts 18:22), showing that the work done there by Peter and Philip had resulted in a church being started there.

work of preaching, discipling, and starting what would become the first church to intentionally send missionaries in the New Testament.

The Book of Acts clearly and repeatedly shows the people of God, from apostles to evangelists to anonymous believers, sent out to do the *work* of ground-breaking, itinerant church planting. It is, in fact, the only pattern of missionary work depicted in the Book of Acts. That in itself should commend this pattern of the *work* to any modern audience trying to discern the basics of Biblical missions. The narratives of Acts are not, however, the only source of this pattern. Paul, in his statements about his and his coworkers' ministry throughout the New Testament, frames their work in the same way, as ground-breaking itinerant church planting.

The Work of Paul and His Coworkers

When Paul spoke and wrote about his ministry, he pictured himself as a foundation layer, a rather overt reference to this ground-breaking style of work. In Romans 15, Paul famously wrote, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.'" (Rom. 15:20-21). This statement, given between Paul's testament to his *fulfilled* church planting work from Jerusalem to Illyricum (vv. 17-19) and his hoped-for work in the unreached regions of Spain (vv. 22-24), reveals how Paul conceived of himself fundamentally as an itinerant ground-breaker, a pioneer church planter among those who had "never been told of him."⁶

In 1 Cor. 3, Paul again calls himself a *foundation-layer*. Referring to his church-planting work in Corinth, Paul says, "According to the grace of God

⁶ For a fuller account of Paul's conception of his pioneering work as a church planter, see Paul Bowers, "Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission," *JETS* 30/2 (June 1987), 185-198.

given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation. . .” (1 Cor. 3:10).⁷ Acts 18 provides the account of Paul’s *master builder* work in Corinth, where he “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” and “many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:4,8). His foundation-laying included extensive discipleship and instruction, for he “stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11). This was a recurring practice in his foundation-laying work, so much so that he could refer back to his teaching and his lived example before the Corinthian believers: “I urge you then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17; author’s emphasis).

When Paul uses foundation-laying as a metaphor for church planting, he is identifying his ministry as both ground-breaking and as itinerant.⁸ He recognized that, in Corinth, others were “building upon” the foundation he had laid (1 Cor. 3:10). This metaphor of foundation-laying fits the pattern of his ministry as shown throughout the New Testament. He was compelled to move on from the foundations he had laid in order to carry the gospel to places and peoples it had not yet been. He worked not just to start a church, but to start many churches in different places, and so he worked itinerantly. The very fact that he was *writing* to the church in Corinth instead of simply preaching to them in person as their pastor testifies to the transient nature of his work.

This commitment to itinerant church-starting was not simply a feature of *Paul’s* work. Among the many named as Paul’s in the New Testament, several of them are shown following this pattern of pioneer church-planting. Priscilla and Aquilla started churches in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3), in or around

⁷ Fee notes that Paul’s usage of the *grace of God* here indicates that his *foundation-laying* work “would refer especially to his apostolic task of founding churches.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Rev. Ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 148.

⁸ Schnabel, *Paul*, 334-41.

Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19), and were leading a house church in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5a). Paul commissioned Titus to “put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town” where they had worked in Crete, thereby fulfilling the foundation-laying pattern in that region (Titus 1:5). When that work was complete, Paul expected Titus to leave Crete and join him in Nicopolis (Titus 3:12). Silas, soon joined by Timothy, walked by Paul’s side through his Macedonian ministry, where they laid the foundation of churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and probably in Berea.⁹ Epaphras, a native of Colossae, had apparently planted the church in Colossae and the surrounding cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis and was now sending greetings back to those churches as a “fellow prisoner” with Paul (Col. 1:7; 4:12).¹⁰

Of Paul’s many “coworkers” in the New Testament, those listed above are most clearly shown to be engaged in itinerant, ground-breaking work.¹¹ Given the relative prevalence of the pattern—from the Acts account and Paul’s description of his own work and his commendation of specific church planters listed above—it’s reasonable to assume that this pattern of work prevailed across the community of New Testament missionary coworkers. The recurrence of the term within Paul’s circles suggests that *coworker* (συνεργός) may be the best Biblical approximate to our modern concept of missionary.¹²

⁹ Luke’s mention of “Sopater the Berean” as one of Paul’s companions in Acts 20:4 makes a strong case that a church was functioning in Berea.

¹⁰ Paul writes to the Colossians that they had “heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel...just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant” (Col. 1:5,7). F.F. Bruce calls Epaphras the “evangelist of the Lycus valley, for there were flourishing churches in that area—in Hierapolis and Laodicea as well as in Colossae.” FF. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 44.

¹¹ At least 17 people are specifically called *coworker* (συνεργός) in connection to Paul. Over 50 people are mentioned as Paul’s associates in the missionary task. For a full list of Pauline associates, see James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem, Christianity in the Making, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 566-571.

¹² “They [συνεργός and συνεργέω as used by Paul] identify a person who is active with and like Paul as a representative of God in the mission ‘work’...of proclamation. The συνεργός is thus Paul’s *fellow worker, fellow missionary, mission colleague*... The συνεργός is also not Paul’s ‘helper,’ ‘companion,’ or ‘servant,’ as the word has repeatedly been mistranslated.”

This does not mean that the specific work of each *coworker* looked exactly like Paul's—they weren't all necessarily the ground-breaking evangelists in each new place. Their ministries, however, contributed to and revolved around the core *work* of itinerant church-planting, a task that included proclaiming the Gospel, developing disciples, planting new churches, appointing leaders, and assisting in their ongoing maturity, as they moved from place to place.

Significantly, none of this broader circle of coworkers is ever called elder, overseer, or pastor. Given the prominence and importance of that office in the New Testament, it is striking that none of these missionaries appear to have taken it up. The local, lengthy ministry of an elder is an honorable one (1 Tim. 5:17) and one that qualified men should aspire to (1 Tim. 3:1). The role and work of an elder is different, however, from the prevailing pattern of missionary work found in the New Testament. Rather than staying to pastor the churches they planted, the coworkers in the New Testament fulfilled their ministry by planting churches that would appoint their own elders and become sending churches themselves.

Released to the *Work*: From Church to Churches

The missionary coworkers of the New Testament came from local churches. Whether by God's sovereign scattering through the Jerusalem persecution or by the Spirit-led sending of Saul and Barnabas at Antioch, local churches were the source for these missionary coworkers. The church in Jerusalem supplied the first wave of sent-ones: Philip, Peter, the anonymous believers who traveled to Antioch, Barnabas, John Mark, and Silas. The next wave of coworkers would come from the newly-planted churches themselves.¹³

W.-H. Ollrog, "συνεργός," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 304.

¹³ Schnabel, *Paul*, 134.

At the start of his second missionary journey, Paul recruited Timothy from the church at Lystra, one of the Galatian churches founded on his first journey (Acts 16:1-3). Part of the fruit of Paul and Barnabas's *fulfilled* work in Lystra was a new missionary coworker. The trend would continue as workers from churches planted by Paul joined him in the work.¹⁴ The list of Paul's companions in Acts 20:4 demonstrates this reality rather clearly. Excepting Timothy, whose hometown was already known, Luke lists the origin of each of the other 6 traveling companions of Paul. They represent a cross-section of the regions where Paul had planted churches on his journeys: Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe, and Asia. Now, as Paul was concluding his work in those regions and headed toward Jerusalem (and on to Rome), his team consisted of coworkers from the churches he had planted.

The picture is now complete: the pattern in the New Testament was for churches to release believers to be coworkers in the *work* of ground-breaking, itinerant church planting. Coworkers went out from local churches, joining with others from local churches to do the work together. The relationship between local churches and missionary coworkers was reciprocal—churches sent church planters who planted churches that sent more church planters. This spiraling pattern of partnership between local churches and coworkers defined the expansion of Gospel work in the New Testament. For those who seek to continue that Gospel expansion to the ends of the earth, this pattern defines it still.

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¹⁴ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 50-51.

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