INTRODUCTION

The Search for Ancient Mission

1. Mission: yes or no?

A century after the apostle Paul, the Greek intellectual, Celsus, in his attack upon the Christians pronounced: “If all men wished to become Christians, the latter would not desire such a result.” Origen’s reply was characteristically forthright:

Now that the above statement is false is clear from this, that Christians do not neglect, as far as in them lies, to take measures to disseminate their doctrine throughout the whole world. Some of them, accordingly, have made it their business to itinerate not only through cities, but even villages and country houses, that they might make converts to God (Contra Celsum 3.9.2-8. Trans. F. Crombie, ANF).

This rather sweeping denial of Christian mission-commitment with an equally robust affirmation of the same finds its counterpart in modern New Testament scholarship.

In his 1976 Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation Paul Bowers devoted one of five chapters to “The Ecclesiological Aspect of Paul’s Understanding of his Mission,” in which he concluded:

We cannot speak of a definite concept unambiguously present in Paul of the church as an intended independent instrument of active mission … In most cases a missionary activity by the church may lie somewhere in the conceptual background, but is not present, or cannot persuasively be shown to be present, in the text itself …

1 Contra Celsum 3.9.2-8 Εἰ ἐθέλησον πάντες ἄνθρωποι εἶναι Χριστιανοὶ, σῶκ ἢν ἔτι οἴδε ἐθέλοιεν. Ὅτι δὲ πειθόδο τὸ τοιώνδε, δήλον ἐκ τοῦ τὸ ὅσον ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῖς Χριστιανοὺς μὴ ἀμελεῖν τοῦ πανταχοῦ τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐπισπείραι τὸν λόγον, Τίνες γοῦν ἐργὸν πεποίηται ἐκπαράγεσθαι οὐ μόνον πόλεις ἄλλα καὶ κώμας καὶ ἐπαύλεις, ἵνα καὶ ἄλλους εὐσεβεῖς τῷ θεῷ κατασκευάσσοι.
It is more accurate to say simply that a concept of the church at mission failed to take any distinct shape in Paul’s thinking.  

A similar conclusion was reached by Wolf-Henning Ollrog in his groundbreaking 1979 monograph, *Paulus und seiner Mitarbeiter*:

Sooft Paulus auf die missionarische Verkündigung zu sprechen kommt, ist niemals eine Gemeinde als Ganze Subjekt des Handelns. Dies gilt für alle Begriffe missionarischen Verkündgens. Stets erscheinen die Gemeinden nur als Objekt, als Empfänger der Botschaft. Sie werden auch innerhalb der Paränese nie dazu angehalten oder darauf verpflichtet, ihrerseits das Evangelium weiterzusagen, also als Missionare zu wirken. Gemessen an der Häufigkeit des Vorkommens der Verkündigungstermini, is dieser Befund eindeutig.

In the 1970’s no ‘debate’ about mission-commitment in early Christianity really existed. The conclusions of Bowers and Ollrog were, therefore, stated independently and without polemic, and their respective treatments of the topic were relatively brief.

Not so, two more recent studies, both of which are set explicitly against the findings of Bowers. In 1992 Peter O’Brien delivered the Annual Moore College Lectures. The topic was *Consumed by Passion: Paul and the Dynamic of the Gospel*, published the following year under the same title.

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O’Brien provides an impressive refutiation of the proposition that converts did not, or were not expected to, participate in the propagation of the faith. Focusing on the Pauline material, O’Brien argues that the key to a proper understanding of the issues lies in the apostle’s conception of the gospel as a compelling force in the life of the church calling upon all believers, by virtue of their faith in the good news, into the ‘evangelistic’ enterprise. This demanded, among other things, the explicit proclamation of the gospel on the part of believers. Paul, “expected them, therefore, to be committed to evangelism just as he was. Paul’s ambitions were to be theirs.”

A ringing endorsement of this thesis was given by James P. Ware, first in a short article on 1 Thessalonians appearing in ZNW and then substantially in his 1996 Yale dissertation, *Holding Forth the Word of Life: Paul and the Mission of the Church in the Letter to the Philippians, in the Context of Second Temple Judaism.* As the title suggests, Ware brings to the discussion two important emphases. First, he provides a most rigorous study of one of Paul’s letters. Secondly, Ware sets his discussion in the context of ‘mission’ in Second Temple Judaism. Concluding that there never was a mission in ancient Judaism, Ware nonetheless argues that ‘attraction’ to the light of the Torah was for many Jews a prominent feature of their self-identity. Ware believes Paul transposed these Jewish conversion motifs into his own mission context and in so doing turned a ‘centripetal’ mission into an enthusiastic ‘centrifugal’ one in which all believers were called upon to herald the gospel to the wider world.

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9 The only other major scholarly contribution to this question is a short monograph written in Dutch: Van Swigchem, D. *Het missionair Karakter van de christelijke Gemeente volgens de Brieven van Paulus en Petrus.* Kampen: Kok, 1955. As the title suggests, van Swigchem explored evidence for congregational mission commitment in the Pauline and Petrine epistles and concluded in the affirmative: converts, like their apostles, engage in the mission of the church. The monograph has been largely overlooked despite the presence at the end of the book (256-66) of a detailed summary written in English. I should make mention also of the dissertation of Robert L. Plummer (submitted to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in May 2001, and not yet published), *The Missionary Nature of the Church: The Apostle Paul and his Churches.*
As with the Celsus-Origen debate, it is striking that such contrary conclusions about Pauline mission expectations can be derived from the same evidence. The burden of the current thesis, then, is to subject the entire Pauline corpus to an inductive historical and philological study in an effort to answer the question: In what ways and to what extent were Paul’s converts expected to promote their new-found faith to unbelievers?

2. Paul the missionary *par excellence*

Focusing on the Pauline material is conducive to our aims in several ways. First, the Pauline epistles are the earliest extant literature of primitive Christianity. As such, they take us back as far as we are able to go within the vast array of ancient Christian writings. It may have been true that Christians of Origen’s time felt compelled to “take measures to disseminate their doctrine,” but did the movement begin this way?\(^\text{10}\)

Secondly, the Pauline corpus provides the single clearest window into the congregational life of one very significant strand of early Christianity. While we cannot assume the Pauline school spoke for all, the fact that we essentially, Plummer’s argument is that Paul’s injunctions to imitate him include the obligation to reflect his missionary proclamation. This theme will be discussed at length in the present study.

It will be clear that the theme of congregational mission-commitment has received very little direct attention in scholarship. Indeed, as recently as 2000, in an article tentatively endorsing the position of P. T. O’Brien, I. Howard Marshall, lamented: “There have been only a few contributions in recent years” (Marshall, I. H. “Who Were The Evangelists?” In *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, edited by J. Adna and H. Kvalbein, 251-63. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000, 252). While several pages of footnotes could be filled with references to scholars and commentators who, in passing, make mention of the theme (Ware, *Holding Forth*, 3-4, provides a small selection), focused studies on congregational mission-commitment remain remarkably scarce. Of course, in popular church culture, books on personal/congregational ‘evangelism’ constitute a veritable industry. Among the most influential of these are Green, M. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. East Sussex: Highland Books, 1990, and Chapman, J. *Know and Tell the Gospel*. Sydney: St Matthias Press, 1998.

possess no fewer than thirteen epistles associated with that tradition means that the findings of such a study are neither obscure nor arbitrary. To offer a converse example, a study of mission-commitment, say, in the Petrine literature would be of limited value for our knowledge of mission in early Christianity since the corpus is small and little can be determined about the *Sitz im Leben* of the writer and his communities.

Thirdly, the apostle Paul is widely regarded as the missionary *par excellence*. It is reasonable therefore to expect his letters above all other ecclesiastical writings of the period to provide us with the most material relevant to our topic. Fourthly, (and as a consequence) the few monographs relating directly to this question treat the Pauline material almost exclusively.\(^\text{11}\)

Eight letters within the Pauline corpus are regarded as *primary* evidence of the convictions of Paul himself. These are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians\(^\text{12}\) and Philemon. So as to gain a more comprehensive perspective on what may be called ‘Pauline Christianity’, however, the remaining five epistles will also be investigated, being treated as *secondary* evidence only. This heuristic distinction between primary and secondary Pauline epistles should not be thought to imply any decision on my part about the authorship or pseudonymity of the latter.

\(^{11}\) An exception is the monograph by Van Swigchem referred to above.

3. The focus of the study

Scholars of mission have usually concerned themselves with issues of chronology and geography or with the apostle’s so-called ‘theology of mission’ or his place in the wider Christian mission. While the present enquiry necessarily relates to this scholarship at points, it is distinctive in at least three ways. First, the focus of this study is upon the relation of Paul’s converts to the mission rather than that of the apostle himself. Thus, what follows attempts to provide a history from ‘below’ rather than from ‘above’. It is surprising that this line of enquiry is so seldom explored given the fact that the Pauline epistles are more about the practices of converts than the personal religious life of Paul.

Having said this, secondly, the study has to do with Pauline ‘expectations’, that is, with the concepts and practices laid upon converts by the apostle. At times it will be difficult to discern whether such expectations corresponded to any real practice amongst members of the community. For instance, that Paul requests prayer for his mission does not of necessity mean that converts were faithful in this. Attention will be paid to this distinction between ‘expectation’ and ‘practice’ throughout the study.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the entire investigation is set within the socio-historical context of Judaism in Paul’s era. While James Ware has attempted something similar in his dissertation, his approach was largely ‘theological’, concerning himself with identifying grand distinctions between Paul’s mission-motifs and those of Judaism – the contrast he makes between centripetal and centrifugal mission is a case in point. The present study, however, endeavours to provide a detailed historical account of the specific mission orientations and activities of Jews as evidenced in the variegated literature. One of the most important results of the research is the discovery of many points of continuity between Jewish practices designed to ‘win’ Gentiles and those expected of Paul’s converts.

To set the study within a Jewish context is not to prejudge the outcome, nor to deny the profound influence of non-Jewish Greek thinking on early Christianity. Indeed, when I commenced my research, mission in pagan tradition was to have occupied one discreet section of the book. Nevertheless, I find myself convinced by the conclusion of Martin Goodman and others that ‘mission’ (in the sense defined below) essentially did not exist
among the cults and philosophies of the Roman empire. Hence, except for an excursus on the motif of ‘commission’ among Cynic preachers (in Chapter Five) I have opted for an integrated approach to the analysis of the relevant Greco-Roman material, referring to it as and when it sheds light upon a particular aspect of the missionary thought and practice of Jewish and/or Pauline communities.

4. A definition of mission

The concept of ‘mission’ is problematic. Strictly speaking the term denotes *sending for a task* (Lat. *missio*) and one recent New Testament study has restricted itself to this concept of movement towards a goal. However, in the secondary literature, the term has come to connote the efforts of religious communities to promote themselves among non-members. It is this wider ‘technical’ sense of *mission* which provides the focus for the present study.

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15 The term ‘mission’ has significant currency, of course, in the theological discipline known as ‘missiology’. The theological and pastoral orientations of missiologists, however, make their definitions of mission less appropriate for an historical investigation. Senior and Stuhlmeuller (Senior, D. & Stuhlmueller, C. *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) in an important book on missiology are keen to distance the term ‘mission’ from what they see as the narrow and outmoded notion of ‘propaganda’. For them mission involves far more than ‘making converts’. It is a complex and holistic attempt to ‘fulfill the divine mandate given to the church that humanity reflect God’s own life as one people drawn together in love and respect’ (3). The definition of mission proposed by the late David Bosch (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology
Two important monographs in recent years have sought to clarify the concept of mission, particularly as it relates to Judaism(s) of the New Testament period. For Scott McKnight mission refers to “behavior that intends to evangelize nonmembers so that these nonmembers will convert to the religion.” While the term ‘evangelize’ in this context is not altogether clear, the thrust of the definition is plain: ‘mission’ aims to draw non-members into a religious community. M. Goodman offers further explication of the concept, proposing four distinct categories of ‘mission’: 1) mission as information, which is not unlike the idea of ‘advertising’; 2) mission as education, which has as its goal the further enlightenment of its members; 3) mission as apologetic, the chief aim of which is merely to defend the religion against criticisms or to gain a political advantage, and; 4) mission as proselytism, or the attempt to ‘convert’ others. This last category is understood in two distinct ways: a) restricted proselytism, which seeks to convert only members of the same (or similar) religious or ethnic tradition (for example, Pharisees attempting to win other Jews to Pharisaism); b) universal proselytism, which aims to convert any and everyone to an exclusive way of life. Goodman restricts his investigation of Jewish ‘mission’ to the last of these (4b) and like McKnight concludes that ancient Judaism never had a mission.

While scholars are free to define their field of inquiry in the way they wish, the studies of McKnight and Goodman are notably minimalist. Information, apologetic, education and proselytism are not so neatly separated. Rather than being distinct types of mission, these categories ought to be viewed as points along a continuum of mission, the ultimate goal of which is the ‘conversion’ of the outsider, conversion being
understood principally as a *new socio-religious allegiance.* By excluding mission as *apologetic*, for example, both writers ignore the fact that apologetic practices often have as their larger goal the winning of outsiders. This is particularly true of what will be defined as ‘ethical apologetic’, or moral behaviour designed to impress or attract outsiders. This form of ‘mission’ is plainly evident in early Christian literature and, as will be shown, featured within some traditions of Judaism as well, something McKnight himself concedes.

The definition of mission adopted in this study coincides with that of McKnight and Goodman to the extent that the inclusion of ‘outsiders’ (conversion) is seen as the intended goal of mission. However, with

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20 There is a tendency in the literature to understand ‘conversion’ principally in its social dimension as a transfer from one social group (with its attendant plausibility structures) to another. The social aspect of conversion should not be ignored, nor should it occupy the center of our conception of the phenomenon. By “new socio-religious allegiance” I am describing conversion as a change in loyalties from one value-system, god or human leader to a divergent value-system, god or human leader. This allegiance may express itself *cultically* (e.g., adopting the sevenfold rite of Mithraism), philosophically (e.g., embracing the teachings of a cynic preacher), morally (e.g., submitting oneself to the Torah) or socially (joining a Christian ἐκκλησία).

21 See, for example, Matt 5:14-16; Titus 2:10; 1 Pet 3:1-2; Ign. Eph 10.1-3.

22 “This form of converting Gentiles [good deeds] is a consistent feature of the evidence and probably formed the very backbone for the majority of conversions to Judaism.” McKnight, Light, 68.
Carleton Paget\textsuperscript{23} — a perceptive critic of the studies of McKnight and Goodman — the parameters of mission are understood more broadly, taking into account the complex relationship that exists between apologetic, information, proselytism, and so on. A “missionary religion,” in the words of Paget, is one which by a “variety of ways makes it clear that conversion to that religion is a desirable thing.”\textsuperscript{24} Unsatisfied with the ‘broad’ definition of Carleton Paget, Rainer Riesner has recently insisted that “every meaningful definition of a missionary religion should include the factors of both intentionality and activity.”\textsuperscript{25} The point is a good one so long as it does not imply that an activity is ‘missionary’ only if conversion is the \textit{directly intended} result: we must allow for a continuum of mission wherein some activities are merely \textit{oriented} toward conversion.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, combining Carleton Paget’s concept of a ‘missionary religion’ with Riesner’s emphasis upon intentionality and activity, ‘mission’ in this study is defined as \textit{the range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders seek to promote their religion to non-adherents.}

The effect of this definition is that activities such as \textit{ethical or verbal apologetic, financial assistance of missionaries and prayer for the conversion of humankind} cannot be ignored simply because they do not directly ‘evangelize non-members’. Rather they must be given their proper place as real expressions of the mission-commitment of a community. This, I believe, constitutes one important advance on previous studies of the topic. The works of Ollrog, Bowers, O’Brien, Ware and Van Swigchem focus almost exclusively on proclamation as the indicator of mission-commitment and, in so doing, miss the significance of a great portion of the evidence, both Jewish and Pauline.

We begin, then, in Chapters 1 and 2 with an investigation of mission-commitment in the various strands of ancient Judaism.

\textsuperscript{24} Paget, \textit{Jewish}, 77.
\textsuperscript{26} Congregational prayer for Paul’s proclamation is an obvious example but many others exist, as will become apparent.