

Unedited draft from *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church: Revised & Expanded* (due to release 2025 or 2026).

Version 3/20/2024

Check back for later versions.

Keep up with the book's release at [frankviola.org/untold](http://frankviola.org/untold)

## KINGDOM STRATEGY

*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14, NIV)*

Paul's strategy in ministry involved careful planning, but it wasn't disconnected from the supernatural guidance he received from the Lord. The apostle's stratagems were a blending of several elements: vision and calling (the big picture), tactical planning, and specific guidance of the Spirit (the details).<sup>1</sup> The following four principles have to do with the kingdom of God and the apostolic patterns that are woven into the story you just read. Each principle sheds light on the New Testament as well as God's mission today.

### ***Paul's fourfold pattern (or strategy) for kingdom advancement***

1) Paul intentionally brought the gospel of the kingdom to populated cities in the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> His purpose appears to have been to plant strong, discipleship

---

<sup>1</sup> The leading of the Spirit and wise planning are not mutually exclusive. For further details on Paul's apostolic ("missionary") strategies, see Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1294-1475; James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 555-557; Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, 214.

<sup>2</sup> Meeks points out that Paul divided the world up into city, wilderness, and sea (2 Corinthians 11:26). He argues (persuasively) that Christianity was an urban movement. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 9-10. Paul sought to bring the gospel to metropolitan centers which served as "strategic cities" in the Roman Empire. Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 280ff. This explains how and why we got the term "pagan." The word was used by the early Christian apologists to group non-Christians into a convenient package. At its root, a "pagan" was a country dweller, an inhabitant of the *pagus* or rural district. Because Christianity primarily spread in the cities, the country bumpkins, or "pagans," were regarded as those who believed in the old gods. Joan Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places: The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 301. The same applies to the word "heathen." Heathens were those who lived out in the "heath" (uncultivated lands outside the city). By contrast, the Christians lived in the cities (with few exceptions). Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 219-220; James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 225. In his apostolic travels, Paul "followed the commercial routes of world trade" and "his mission initially embraced urban centers." Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 179. While the cities were mostly evangelized by the Christians, the countrysides were nearly

communities through whom the gospel would spread throughout those cities and beyond to nearby areas.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, if the gospel had penetrated a city enough for a kingdom community to be born, Paul considered the entire city and province to be evangelized.<sup>4</sup>

2) Paul would preach the gospel to the Jew first, then to the Gentile.<sup>5</sup> While the apostle's specific commission was to the Gentiles, his heart was with his own people, the Jews.

*Brothers, my heart's desire and my prayer to God is for Israel, that they may be saved. (Romans 10:1)*

The gospel, therefore, was to be preached to the Jew first, just as Jesus did.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Paul would typically seek to preach in cities with a decent-sized Jewish population, beginning in the synagogue.<sup>7</sup> If a synagogue wasn't present, he would seek out a clean place (like a river) where Jews and God-fearers worshiped. (This happened in Philippi.)

3) Paul sought to convert a well-to-do person who owned a home.<sup>8</sup> After being converted to Christ, that person (being the head of a household) would serve as the

---

untouched. Since the majority of the empire was made up of the countrysides, by A.D. 400, the empire was predominantly non-Christian. But the Christians during that time controlled the leadership positions, power, and media. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100-400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 83.

<sup>3</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 382; Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 357. Paul was an urban church planter. For the most part, he bypassed the rural areas and ignored the small communities and sleepy little towns. Instead, he went directly to the major urban areas. He appears to have spent a lot of time in and around coastal cities in the Mediterranean, probably because travel was easier, and the populations were larger. The more urban areas in the *pax Romana* (Roman peace) better prepared people for the gospel given their ethnic diversity and unconventional nature. Richard Plummer, et al., *Paul's Missionary Methods*, 20, 180-181.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 15:19, 23. See the explanation by Roland Allen in *Missionary Methods*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:16; 2:9-10; Acts 1:8; 13:46. For a full examination of how Paul proclaimed the gospel of Jesus throughout his ministry, along with his extra-local shepherding responsibilities, see Eckhard Schnabel, *New Testament Theology*, 333-653.

<sup>6</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 547-549; Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, 100-102.

<sup>7</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 225; *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 557-563.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 167-171, 185-187; James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 571. In the first century, only people who were well-to-do could afford a house. See Jeffrey Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 27-28. "Well-to-do" doesn't mean "rich." The rich lived in villas. According to Robert Banks, we have no evidence that the first-century Christians had villas. The Christians hadn't penetrated that stratum of society until the second and third century. Personal correspondence with Robert Banks, 9/19/21. David deSilva agrees, pointing out that villas were usually owned by the uber rich. Personal correspondence with deSilva, 3/11/22. For the classic design of a villa, see Ben Witherington III, *A Week in the Fall of Jerusalem*, 70. While the early

host for Paul's operations.<sup>9</sup> From that home, Paul would raise up a new kingdom community in the city. The house would be the place where the ekklesia gathered.<sup>10</sup> This strategy corresponds to Jesus' instructions to His disciples about finding a man of peace (Luke 10:5ff.).<sup>11</sup> As one scholar put it,

**Editor: this indented quote is off. Compare with next quote. Please fix.**

*It was typical of the Pauline missional approach in any given city to initially target individuals from higher social levels. In this way Paul was able to win homeowners, along with their entire households, for the gospel and to set up a base of operations in their house for local and regional mission.*<sup>12</sup>

---

Christians weren't rich, some of them had means and were "well off" and even "wealthy" rather than poor (like most people during their time). Examples are Priscilla and Aquila, who hosted believers and churches in different cities and had enough money to travel, which was expensive in that day—Corinth in the early days (Acts 18:26, NIV), Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19), and Rome (Romans 16:5). There is also Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:40); Gaius Titius Justice in Corinth later (Romans 16:23); Jason in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-7); Philemon in Colossae (Philemon 1:2); Nympha in Hierapolis (Colossians 4:15). These were all well-to-do. Very few Christians lived in their own homes in the first century. Instead, the vast majority of believers rented small *insulae* (tenement apartments) in urban areas. This was in accordance with the structure of Roman society. Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 147. Because of the spatial requirements that Christians needed, they likely gathered in peristyle houses. David Balch, et al., *Early Christian Families in Context*, 42. A peristyle home featured an interior open space or garden that was surrounded by roofed colonnades on three or four of its sides. The entrances to living, sleeping, and kitchen spaces would be found all along the perimeter of the colonnade. According to Keener, "Luke likes to report converts of status when possible" (see Acts 8:27, 38; 13:12; 17:12; 18:8, etc.). Craig Keener, *Acts*, 3:2678.

<sup>9</sup> In the New Testament, "household" was a code word for well-to-do. Personal correspondence with Jeffrey Weima, 2/10/22. "Early Christianity was a household movement. It sought the conversion of heads of households, whose dependents followed them into the faith." John Byron, *A Week in the Life of a Slave*, 24. "[M]ost scholars are in agreement: the fact that early Christian communities met in homes is of great sociohistorical, ecclesiological, and missional significance." Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> According to Keener, "Homes rather than 'church' buildings were where the Christians met for the first three centuries of the church's existence." Craig Keener, "Lessons on Acts," Session 21. See also *Ante Pacem*, chap. 5 and 166. According to McKnight, Christians wouldn't meet in basilicas until the time of Constantine. Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*, 10. For details on the origins of church buildings, see Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, chap. 2.

<sup>11</sup> "... the house and household were the immediate mission objective; the house fellowship was the starting and gathering point for the final objective, which was reaching the entire town or city." Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 54. The "wealthiest member and the largest house" provided a "regular venue for 'the whole church' in different centres." James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*, 168.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 187.

4) Paul continually moved west as he preached the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>13</sup> If you examine all of Paul's apostolic journeys, you'll note that he traveled from Syrian Antioch, to Galatia, to Greece, to Roman Asia, to Rome, to Spain.<sup>14</sup> According to F.F. Bruce,

*No Spirit-taught student of secular history can fail to observe the marvellous way in which God prepared the world for the Gospel; and it is equally instructive to mark how this state of preparation was used when in the fulness of time the followers of Christ began to carry out His commission and preach the Gospel to every creature.*<sup>15</sup>

As I've argued in *Insurgence*, Paul was seeking to reclaim the nations for God. He was tracing the Gentile nations that rebelled against the Creator in Genesis 10 until he came to "the end of the earth" in his day. His goal was to bring in what he called "the fullness of the Gentiles."<sup>16</sup>

### ***Why did Paul and the other apostles risk their lives and suffer untold horrors to bring the gospel to the world?***

The common evangelical answer is to save individuals from hell. There's no question that the gospel brings life to individual souls, eternal life in the present age and in the age to come. However, as I've argued in *From Eternity to Here*, the mission of God goes far beyond the salvation of individual souls from eternal judgment.

God has an eternal purpose that reaches from before humans fell and were in need of salvation. God's timeless purpose is to secure a body for the Son, a house for the Father, a bride for the Son, and a family for the Father—all through the Holy Spirit. Put another way, the ageless purpose of God is to expand the fellowship and communion of the triune God.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Plummer, et al., *Paul's Missionary Methods*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> For details on the journey motif in Luke-Acts, see Floyd Filson, "The Journey Motif in Luke-Acts," in W. Ward Gasque & Ralph Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel, Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), 68-77. For further information on travel, money, letters, and people in Paul's day, see E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought*, chap. 4.

<sup>15</sup> F.F. Bruce, "The Early Church in the Roman Empire," *The Bible Student* 56 (Bangalore, India: March-April 1933): 30-32.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Viola, *Insurgence*, 351-361; James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 541-546; Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 298-306.

<sup>17</sup> This explains why salvation in the New Testament is a community-creating event, not simply an individualistic experience. Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 120ff.; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000). To be "added to the Lord" was to be "added to the church" (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 11:24, ESV). Keener rightly notes, "As far in the future as we look, we will always be His servants before His face, not being *Him* (Revelation

Evangelism, discipleship, and the forming of ekklesias are never separated in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> This epic idea is wrapped up in the phrase *the kingdom of God*—the central message of Jesus. The kingdom of God is the joining together of heaven and earth, just as it was in the beginning (and as it will be in the end).<sup>19</sup> Paul and the other apostles sought to bring the gospel message to all who never heard it.<sup>20</sup>

That gospel wasn't just about salvation from eternal judgment. It was primarily about fulfilling God's eternal purpose, which in a fallen world, begins (not ends) with salvation. The apostolic mission, therefore, was to establish kingdom communities throughout the Roman Empire which would express God's eternal purpose.<sup>21</sup> Those kingdom communities—ekklēsias, as the New Testament calls them—were colonies of heaven on earth. Through them, God was reclaiming the nations that had fallen under the grip of evil powers. Paul's church planting trips, therefore, were not just aimed at creating personal salvation and inner transformation. They were designed to "establish a new kind of kingdom on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>22</sup> *In other words, they were to produce the ekklesia of God.*

God's intention, as it was in the beginning, is to recover the earth from the power of His enemy and establish His reign throughout the world so that His good creation may reflect Him perfectly in the world, and God and humans

---

22:3-4). But the shape of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:3, 16, 22—a cube like the Old Testament Holiest Place—connotes perfect indwelling, without distraction, forever and ever!" Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 12/4/23.

<sup>18</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:356-357. Schnabel rightly says, "Missionary work and church must not be separated, since the very goal and purpose of missionary work is the creation of a community of disciples" (356). In *Discipleship in Crisis*, I make the case that Jesus' word to the Twelve in Matthew 28 to "make disciples of all nations" was fulfilled through the apostolic planting of ekklesias. (A free copy of this eBook is available at [frankviola.org/discipleship](http://frankviola.org/discipleship).) Disciples are made within the context of the ekklesia, not apart from it. The ekklesia is the believer's native habitat.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. The Garden of Eden was the overlap between the divine realm (heaven) and the human realm (earth). It reappears again at the end of Revelation, only this time it has become a city. Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 are the only chapters in the Bible where there is no sin, corruption, or marks of the Fall. For this reason, they give us a clear window into God's eternal purpose.

<sup>20</sup> One of Paul's specific strategies was to pioneer the gospel in virgin territories (Romans 15:20). More on this later.

<sup>21</sup> In the words of Roland Allen, "Paul did not go about as a missionary preacher merely to convert individuals: he went to establish churches from which the light might radiate throughout the whole country round." Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 81. Paul was not just an evangelist; he planted churches and visited them. He also wrote letters to them. And when he couldn't visit them, he sent his co-workers in his place. Mark Fairchild, "The Last Apostle," documentary film.

<sup>22</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 106-107.

may be joined together in perfect union.<sup>23</sup> As one philosopher famously said, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”<sup>24</sup> In this chapter, I have presented the “why” of the story.

---

<sup>23</sup> This is the final answer to the Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6:10. I explain and develop all of these themes in my books *From Eternity to Here* and *Insurgence*.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (originally published in 1889) in the section entitled, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man.” Of course, I disagree with Nietzsche’s overall philosophy, but this quote is fitting.