Suffering and Intercession: Pauline Missionary Methods as a Paradigm for the Future of Evangelical Mission

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Introduction

How can the contemporary church get the gospel message across the horizon? Various monographs and essays proffer a plethora of missionary methods and strategies to answer this question by examining Paul's missionary methods as paradigmatic to the contemporary church.

Paul's proclamation and teaching, his approach to contextualization, his focus on cities, culture influencers, and responsive peoples, his proactive and attentive stance toward mentoring, and his practice of appointing and delegating leaders within new church plants have taken the attention of missiologists and missionaries. The practice of the missionary enterprise and academic research regarding missionary methods, however, have overlooked or paid too little attention to one or both of the most valuable pillars of missionary methods: suffering and intercession.

In this article, I survey major works on missionary methods to illustrate the lacuna of these two essential methods in the Christian missionary endeavor, followed by a sketch of possible reasons for their neglect. By a close reading of the epistles to the Philippians and the Colossians, I will argue that suffering and intercession are oft-neglected Pauline paradigmatic missionary methods that the Western evangelical missionary enterprise needs to emulate in order to carry out its missionary mandate.

A Brief Literature Review of Past Evangelical Missionary Methods

Roland Allen

Roland Allen, the Anglican minister and a former missionary to China, wrote his magnum opus, Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours? in 1912. Allen argues that the

missionary methods employed by the contemporary missionary enterprise are not in step with Pauline missionary methods. Those who attempted to emulate Paul's missionary methods "neither understood or practised the Apostle's method at all" and were lacking a full-orbed understanding of his strategies (Allen 1962, 6). He explicitly states that "St. Paul's method is not in harmony with the modern Western spirit" (Allen 1962, 6). During his time in China, Allen observed the Western missionary enterprise fumbling and failing because of the missionaries' superiority complex and dependence on self rather than the Spirit. In order to cure the languishing missionary enterprise, Allen highlights essential methods from Paul's missionary praxis.

Paul was, Allen argues, a Spirit-sensitive missionary who went to wherever God sent him. He did not have detailed, well-planned missionary journeys. However, once he got to a place, he "made it a centre of Christian life" (Allen 1962, 17). He did not attempt to confine his preaching to a certain class of people. He used to begin his proclamation in the synagogue and when rejected he would proclaim the gospel to the Greeks. He was always ready to preach the gospel to whoever was willing to hear (Allen 1962, 19). Paul's missionary methods had a place for Spirit-empowered miracles in healing the sick or delivering the possessed. With regard to finances, Paul "did not seek financial help for himself … [and] to those to whom he preached … [nor] administer local church funds" (Allen 1962, 49). His preaching was comprised of repentance and faith highlighting the need to embrace salvation blessings and avoid the consequences of rejecting the offer of forgiveness. Paul established churches and taught converts to be dependent on the Spirit rather than on him. His pre-baptism trainings of the new converts were not sophisticated but focused on the essentials of the faith. He also allowed them to exercise their spiritual gifts.

Allen chastised the missionary enterprise of his day for neglecting these paradigmatic missionary methods adopted and practiced by Paul. His prophetic and incisive analysis of the missionaries in China would reverberate throughout the subsequent century. Unfortunately, some of Paul's methods are still castigated even in our day. But what is missing from Allen's essential prescription of Pauline missionary methods for the modern church are suffering and intercession.

Eckhard J. Schnabel

Eckhard J. Schnabel explicates Paul's missionary methods in the Greco-Roman context in his helpful piece, Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods (Schnabel 2008). His aim is to offer a paradigm for the contemporary church from Paul's life and missionary methods. Paul, Schnabel posits, was a flexible missionary who planned his

missionary work but was also sensitive to "inner promptings" at the same time (Schnabel 2008, 257). Schnabel identifies seven Pauline missionary methods (Schnabel 2008, 257–354). First, Paul employed verbal proclamation to convey the gospel message. Second, he trekked to cities, towns and villages, for that was where people lived. Third, Paul also travelled to influential Roman provinces to preach the gospel. Fourth, he specifically went to places where people were accustomed to conducting conversations and sharing ideas: synagogues, marketplaces, workshops, and private houses. Fifth, Paul attempted to reach every social class in order to avail the gospel to various ethnicities and cultures. Sixth, Paul adapted his message using a "principle of identification," but usually without following the normative rhetorical method (Schnabel 2008, 336–337, 354). Seventh, Paul used "his missionary work and … his personal behavior" for his credibility, and this assisted in his success in his missionary work (Schnabel 2008, 355).

None of the above-mentioned methods identified by Schnabel include suffering and intercession as Pauline missionary methods. To his credit, Schnabel acknowledges that Paul's suffering is a vehicle for his missionary work: "Paul suffers as an apostle of Jesus Christ, just as Jesus suffered during his mission. Suffering is an inevitable corollary of missionary work" (Schnabel 2008, 143). However, intercession as a Pauline missionary method is wanting in Schnabel's work.

Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry

In 2012, Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours—an edited volume that probes the impact of Roland Allen—was published (Plummer and Terry, 2012). This volume surveys Paul's theology and missiology. Paul's focus was on proclaiming the gospel (euangelion) (Plummer 2012, 47–48); Paul planted churches, organized them, allowed autonomy of leadership by the new converts and conducted the two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper (Merkle 2012, 56–73).

Paul's suffering is part of his missionary endeavor to proclaim the gospel, to edify the Church but also to identify with Jesus (Howell 2012, 95–106). But here also the link between suffering and intercession is missing. Paul's missionary methods include struggles with evil spiritual forces, heresy, and sin (Keener 2012, 107–123). John Mark Terry highlights various missionary methods employed by indigenous mission advocates: John L. Nevius, Roland Allen, Melvin Hodges, Donald McGavran, and Alan Tippett. Their proposals along with his concurring conclusion reveal the emphasis of establishing self-governing indigenous churches. Terry's essay also betrays the lack of

sufferings and intercession as key missionary methods (Terry 2012, 160–174). Most of the essays regurgitate Allen's prescription without adding suffering and intercession as paradigmatic missionary methods. The exception, however, is Christoph W. Stenschke's brief discussion of prayer and suffering as Paul's missionary method (Stenschke 2012, 83). The brevity, however, necessitates a full treatment of these two essential Pauline missionary methods.

John Mark Terry and J. D. Payne

John Mark Terry and J. D. Payne published Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Introduction in 2013. Their work is valuable as they survey various missionary strategies utilized in different periods of the church. Contextualization, self-governance, proclamation, church planting, and ethnographic research are some of the methods prescribed. Surprisingly, a number of missionary movements and individuals do not consider sufferings and intercession. Given the span the volume covers, one would expect to at least find these two methods included in a discussion of either Paul or the early church's missionary endeavor.

Craig Ott and J. D. Payne

The same holds true for an edited volume of Missionary Methods: Research, Reflections, and Realities (Ott and Payne, 2013). In this volume, Robert L. Gallagher rightly points out that Roland Allen's work fails to "connect prayer with Paul's missionary methods" (Gallagher 2013, 18); nonetheless, the volume he himself contributed to does not incorporate prayer (intercession) as a Pauline missionary method, and I would also add that suffering is absent.

J. D. Payne

At the Evangelical Missiological Society national conference in 2019, J. D. Payne read "Mission Amid the Crisis of Persecution: Challenge and Guidelines for Research and Training." The thrust of his paper is that most missionaries from the West are ill-prepared with regard to persecution for the faith. His paper as such insists that churches and mission organizations need to understand the nature and inevitability of persecution in order to prepare Western missionaries for possible persecution.

One avenue that could prepare the Western Church and missionaries is conducting "better research in the area of persecution" (Payne 2019, 2). It is worthy to note that Payne's paper calls the Western Church and its missionaries to embrace persecution as

part and parcel of the Christian life. But what could have strengthened his observations and suggestions is considering persecution not just as something a Christian will experience as normal but also something that can be embraced as a missionary method in advancing the gospel.

The above survey makes it clear that sufferings and intercession are not usually in the purview of missiologists and missionaries. But what are the possible reasons for neglecting these two vital missionary methods in the contemporary church?

Possible Reasons for Neglect

Although Allen's Missionary Methods is critiqued here for not including sufferings and intercession as Paul's missionary methods, his work is still valuable in detecting the incongruence between Paul's missionary methods and the Western evangelical missionary enterprise.

Concurring with his diagnosis of "the modern Western spirit" (Allen 1962, 6), I submit that the absence of sufferings and intercession in the discussion and practice of contemporary missiologists and missionaries is because of these two main reasons:

Self-reliance

Allen notes the proclivity of Western missionaries to be self-reliant. He writes: "We modern teachers from the West are by nature and by training persons of restless activity and boundless confidence" (Allen 1962, 6). This self-reliance could emanate from the education missionaries have received, and the financial abundance they have acquired and the technological advancement the West has achieved. Knowledge and material possessions create a superiority complex against other nations and people groups and fund the notion that one can change or even save the world (Hunter 2010).

The self can too easily drive the missionary endeavor. It denies that supernatural guidance and intervention take place in missionary activities. Self-reliance feeds on secularism that propagates reason-based and man-centered solutions to the problems of humanity. Of course, the evangelical missionary enterprise will not endorse a full-blown, radical secularism for obvious theological reasons. Nonetheless, a toned-down, restrained secular ideology has crept into the Western Church and its missionary practice. It is hard for the Western context to swallow suffering as a missionary method as the West is striving to eradicate suffering and pain at all costs in order to make life

easier and more comfortable. This secular ideology quenches the nudging of the Spirit, or the missionary's sensitivity and openness to the Spirit's plan, and instead, the tendency is to stick to their rigidly planned strategy.

Intercession, on the other hand, assumes that one is helpless to bring about change. It denies self-assertiveness and self-reliance as a platform to operate. It is a position, a method, a stance that acknowledges and seeks divine assistance. However, this approach is pushed to the periphery as a result of the overconfidence that results from the modern missionary enterprise's imbibing of secularism.

Individual Rights and Democracy

A second reason for the lack of sufferings/persecution and intercession as missionary methods in the West, especially among American Christians, is an overemphasis on individual liberty and democracy. A missionary, who is steeped in the exercise of religious liberty and the freedom of worship and speech, and who if necessary is allowed to defend his or her liberty, would feel that it is natural for him or her to expect the same thing in other contexts. J. D. Payne is correct that "[m]uch of the New Testament addresses mission in the context of persecution" (Payne 2019, 5). Along with Payne, I lament that passages that explicate sufferings and persecution are sanitized or overlooked because of the undue emphasis of theologians, missionaries and missiologists on religious liberties. He further notes that pre-tribulation eschatology has enabled the Western Church to "believe they will not be present for such opposition and therefore, no theology of persecution is necessary" (Payne 2019, 7). I propose here that the eschatological misconception is also funded by the notion that the West—particularly the US—is the land of the free and is invincible to any form of religious persecution. In other words, the Western Church demands freedom of worship but at the same time strives to dictate the consequences of that worship. But is this warranted by the biblical texts? Regardless of the context, Christians can always worship, but they should also embrace the consequences. To want to worship and to also demand freedom from sufferings is a Constantinian method rather than a Pauline one. The Constantinian missionary method runs on self-sufficiency and military might. This method inflicts sufferings and persecution instead of willingly embracing and maximizing persecution and suffering to advance the cause of the gospel. It does not attempt to plead with God for help when there is a sword to swing and a context to conquer. To such flawed Western Constantinian missionary methods, Paul provides an alternative.

Suffering and Intercession: Fundamental Pauline Missionary Methods for the Future of Evangelical Mission

Before discussing suffering and intercession as Pauline missionary methods, it is appropriate to situate the two epistles in their historical backgrounds. Both the epistles to the Philippians and Colossians were—along with Ephesians and Philemon—penned during Paul's imprisonment (Phil 1:7, 13, 17; Col 4:18). These four epistles, as a result, are named the "Prison Epistles" (Gladd 2016, 301). Paul knew the believers in Philippi (Phil 2:12; 4:2–3) whereas he had never seen those in Colossae (Col 2:2).

His apostolic responsibility for both of them and others made him strive to advance the gospel by any means necessary. The church at Philippi was rocked by lack of unity and lack of humility (Phil 2:1–4; 4:2–3), whereas the church in Colossae was dealing with a doctrine that deemphasized the supremacy of Christ (Col 2:8; 16–23). While addressing these issues, Paul reveals his missionary methods.

Suffering

After expounding the supremacy of Christ in heaven and on earth (Col 1:15–20) and Christ's reconciliation work through his vicarious death, Paul reveals that he is "a minister" (diakonos) of the unchanging, universal gospel (Col 1:21–23). His gospeling ministry, however, entails suffering. Paul describes this suffering with the well-known and difficult expression: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24).

Scholars have provided several interpretations to this difficult passage: 1) Christ's suffering is insufficient so Paul is supplementing what is lacking in him. 2) Paul is suffering in union with Christ. 3) Paul is suffering not to redeem but to proclaim the gospel, which is dubbed as "messianic woes" (Moo 2008, 150–153). The third option fits the context best.

In Paul's proclamatory ministry, suffering is a vehicle to propel the gospel forward (cf. Hay 2000, 73). Suffering as an inevitable factor in Paul's missionary work was foretold earlier during his conversion and commissioning period: "But the Lord said to him [Ananias], 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). From that day on, suffering in proclaiming

the gospel was a normal missionary reality in Paul's life and ministry. He was threatened, flogged, imprisoned, insulted, and plotted against because of his missionary endeavor (Acts 16:19–24; 22:24–25; 23:12–35; 2 Cor 11:25–27). Instead of begrudging and complaining, Paul states: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake" (Col 1:24). In addition to rejoicing, Paul was also maximizing his suffering.

In Philippians 1:12–14, Paul's imprisonment was used as a vehicle to advance the gospel message among the Roman soldiers, his captors. The progress of the gospel in prison sparked a zeal for proclamation among other believers.

Except in two instances, Paul never used his Roman citizenship "card" to accuse either Jews or Gentiles that they were infringing on his individual rights. Even those two moments when he invoked his Roman citizenship were strategic moves either to protect the incipient Philippian church (Acts 16:37–38) (Larkin 1995, 243) or to make sure he got to Rome to stand before Caesar to proclaim the gospel to him (Acts 22:22–29) (Larkin 1995, 325). His customary missionary method was to embrace suffering and use it to disseminate the death and resurrection of Messiah Jesus. He understood that Christian missionary work is incompatible with a conquistador or Constantinian approach that attempts to dominate the culture and subdue detractors of the Christian message with the sword. His imitation of Christ is evident in that he is ministering from weakness, and that brokenness is the focal point of his missionary endeavor. He boasted in his suffering, pain, and the costly life he led rather than in his success or identity (2 Cor 11:16–33). In fact, he declared that he strove to "[forget] what lies behind and [strain] forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3:13). His desire was that he "may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him [Christ] in his death, that by any means possible [he] may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10–11). This is not a mere individualized mysticism. Paul wanted to be like Christ in every way: to pour out his life as a sacrifice for the progression of the gospel among sinners.

Pauline adoption of suffering as a missionary method is what the church—especially the Western Church—needs to emulate. Instead of striving to avoid suffering in private and public life, the modern church should instead embrace it with joy and utilize it in propagating the gospel. Commenting on Colossians 1:24, David M. Hay writes: "Paul's sufferings are never presented as a model that they should imitate" (Hay 2000, 74). This statement, however, does not stand in the face of the evidence from Philippians, Colossians, and the non-Pauline epistle 1 Peter. Hay's statement excuses believers from adopting suffering as a missionary method. Rolland Allen foresaw such an argument in

1912. To those who view Pauline missionary methods as exceptional, he offered an answer: "St Paul's missionary method was not peculiarly St Paul's" (Allen 1962, 4). Others argue that persecution is an enemy of gospel progression, and Tertullian's oft-quoted maxim "the blood of martyrs is seed" should not be propagated as the norm (Payne 2019, 12–13). However, the inevitability of suffering and the hostility the world has for the gospel and its messengers urge us to embrace suffering, rejoice in afflictions, and utilize them to advance the gospel.

The Ethiopian Protestant Church's growth during the merciless persecution of the Church by the staunchly Communist government from the 1970s to the 1990s is illustrative of Tertullian's maxim. The number of believers doubled as the iron fist of socialist rule hammered down the roofs of the church. Imprisoned pastors and members of the Church were instrumental for many to encounter the risen Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel, for "the word of God was not chained" (2 Tim 2:8). Tibebe Eshete notes that "as Christians were thrown into jail, they turned the prison houses into pulpits" (Eshete 2009, 237). Others who shed their blood for being believers and proclaimers became seed for evangelistic zeal and subsequent revival among university students (Eshete 2009, 245–247). The believers submitted themselves to the edge of the sword rather than attempting to subjugate others under their own swords. They proclaimed the simple but foundational gospel at the cost of their jobs, schools, dignity, freedom, even their lives, so that others could cross from death to life. Some of the martyrs did not even get a burial place in the society. They were rejected in life and death for the sake of the gospel. The Pauline model and Tertullian's maxim rang true in the Ethiopian milieu. In other words, suffering as a missionary method is a model to embrace.

Intercession

There is no other Christian spiritual discipline that has suffered more in a secular society than prayer. As such, the neglect of intercession as a missionary method is understandable. Nevertheless, what is intercession? Intercession is a particular kind of prayer that is done on behalf of another (Balentine 1984, 161–173; Parker 2006, 80–81; Le Déaut 1970, 35). The notion of intercession within the canonical texts as well as non-canonical books— Testament Levi,1–4 Maccabees, 1 Enoch, The Mishnah and Philo— reveal that intercession is seeking divine intervention on behalf of a person or people who are in danger of God's wrath, military invasion, or sickness.

Intercession is a mediatorial prayer seeking God's help or forgiveness. Intercession is most evident in the ministry of the prophets. Moses interceded on behalf of the idol-worshipping and murmuring people of God (Exod 32:11–14, 25–35; Num 13–14). The prophet Jeremiah labored on behalf of the people who refused to listen to God's Word. He persisted in interceding even when he was told by God not to intercede (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1).

Paul was a student of the prophets and the mediators of the previous generation. He earnestly interceded on behalf of Jews and Gentiles so that they would embrace the gospel and remain rooted in it. The term that conveys Paul's intercession is the verb agōnizomai (ἀγωνίζομαι) and the noun agōn (ἀγών) (Col 1:29; 2:1). The common translation of the term is struggle, concern, strive. Scholars note that the word expresses athletic imagery (BDAG 2000, 17; Harris 1990, 78). David W. Pao states that the struggle in Colossians 1:29 and 2:1 is Paul's "'striving' with his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles who is faithful in proclaiming the gospel message" (Pao 2012, 135). N. T. Wright posits that the term here conveys Paul's work ethic (Wright 2008, 97). Moo thinks that the term here "likely refers to the general work of ministry: preaching the gospel, admonishing converts, resisting false teachers" (Moo 2008, 162). These scholars have overlooked or deemphasized the notion of intercessory prayer that Paul mentions by merely associating it with sufferings or proclamation.

J. B. Lightfoot, however, is correct to observe that agōn and agōnizomai here in Colossians express the fact that Paul is having an "inward struggle, the wrestling in prayer" (Lightfoot 1959, 172). A similar idea is seen in Epaphras' ministry. Paul notes that Epaphras "is … always struggling (agōnizomenos) on your behalf in his prayers" (Col 4:12). Paul's agony or struggle in Colossians 1:29 and 2:1 should be understood in two ways: first, as an apostle to the Gentiles, he is concerned for those who have not heard the gospel yet as they are under the threat of divine judgment (cf. Rom 1:18–3:20; 9:1–4). Therefore, a fight or struggle through intercession is paramount. Second, particularly in the case of Colossians, the church in Colossae and its surrounding cities were threatened by false teachings that deemphasize Christ's identity and work (see especially Col 2:16–23). Thus, there is the threat of false doctrine and, as such, the need for intervening intercessory prayer. Epaphras' continual intercession on behalf of the churches he planted substantiates this second point (cf. Col 4:12). Epaphras emulated Paul's sufferings and intercessory prayers. He was in prison suffering for the gospel like Paul, but he was also interceding for his missionary work (Melick, 1991, 329–330).

Paul not only interceded for his missionary works but he also solicited others to intercede for his gospel proclamation. In Colossians 4:3–4, he requests the believers in Colossae to "pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak." His request for intercession makes it clear that it is essential to plead with God to open doors for the gospel so that the lost, those who are in danger of eternal judgment, could escape by hearing and embracing the gospel message. The request also indicates that once the door for the gospel is open, communicating the message with clarity is essential. However, clarity does not solely rely on the missionary's training, rhetorical skills, the amount of knowledge the missionary has acquired, or experience. Clarity depends on God assisting the missionary to make it clear. Paul—a seasoned missionary and a highly educated clergy—understood that intercession is the backbone of his proclamatory ministry.

Conclusion

Christians, Western and Non-Western alike, need to realize the Christian missionary endeavor requires the sweat, pain, tears, and blood of the one who follows Christ and strives to make the salvation blessings known to the lost. Jesus declared, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). This verse is exemplified in Paul's missionary endeavor. This should be the guiding principle of church planting movements rather than crafting pain-free and suffering-free missionary methods and strategies. For instance, the insider movement proponents need to integrate such a Pauline paradigm in their evangelistic and discipleship efforts, rather than encouraging converts to live a double life. In fact, lack of suffering and persecution in the life of the church could be a signal that the church has succumbed to the culture and is proclaiming a watered-down gospel rather than considering the lack of persecution and suffering as a sign of freedom and democracy. This is not a call for Christians to go out and incense the masses with reckless provocation. Of those provocateurs, we have many.

The reality of hell, the seriousness of spiritual darkness, and the unjust, broken and aching world need to come to the fore of our theological and missiological formulations. It appears that God's impending judgment against sin and the lost is attenuated, and this in turn has led the church to abdicate its priestly mediatorial intercession on behalf

of the lost. Put differently, the near absence of intercession in the missionary methods, but more so in the church of the secular context, betray the withering of some theological motifs from the terrain of the developed and progressed societies.

To mitigate the Constantinian or Charlemagnian inclination of doing mission, the evangelical missionary enterprise needs to adopt a position of weakness, humility and brokenness. Missionaries and missiologists alike should embrace rejection, sorrow, grief, affliction, even martyrdom so that they become "a light for the nations" (Isa 53; 49:6). Dependence on the machine the West has produced, the thick tomes the Western Church has penned, the fat wallets they carry or the friendship with and the sword of Constantine will boost one's ego but not the number of genuine disciples. However, openness to the Spirit, flexibility to be led and detoured by him, forging genuine brotherhood and sisterhood with Non-Western believers, showing compassion and respect to the lost will help dethrone self-reliance and an individualistic lifestyle.

In conclusion, other missionary methods like proclamation, Bible translation, contextualization, etc., should be couched in sufferings and intercession as these two primary methods prioritize dependence on the Spirit, but also assist in carrying out the task of making Christ known throughout the world. If the evangelical church takes its missionary mandate seriously, and also if the church desires to bear fruit in the world where hostility, rejection, and evil keep abounding, it should emulate the two Pauline missionary methods.

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