

Paul as Founder of Communities

Key Passages:

Romans 15:17-29

I Corinthians 1:10-17

I Corinthians 11:18

2 Corinthians 10:8-17

Romans 16:1-16

Acts 18:1-4

Acts 19:8-10

In starting a new movement one is likely to follow the models of groups already known. Paul had four models he could have followed:

a) synagogue

b) trade guild

c) philosophical school

d) household

- a) A **synagogue** is an assembly of at least ten Jewish men. As a place of worship where Scriptures were read, studied, and explained, and prayer was offered. This would have provided a very good model for Paul's Gentile communities.
- b) People who worked in the same trade would have a **worker's guild** to help to support them financially and otherwise in times of crisis. As a voluntary organisation of people with common interests, it has parallels with Paul's communities.
- c) **Philosophical schools** were groups of disciples who emphasized brotherly love and fellowship. They focused on a founding figure, usually an exemplary wise or good man, whose teachings they valued. Teaching, learning, studying, and writing were practised in this group, who would hold communal meals often in memory of their founders. Usually they had rules or customs regarding admission, membership, and relation to the rest of society.
- d) Paul's communities were essentially **house churches** meeting in private homes. In Graeco-Roman society there were traditional rules about the conduct of the household as it was the smallest legal unit of society (although it could be larger than a family today, in that it probably involved slaves as well as the wider family). The head of the house, usually the father, was legally responsible for it. Paul sees his converts as his children, as sons and daughters in the family

of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ. This suggests that the household was a basic image for Paul's believing communities. Households were not unique to the Graeco-Roman world but constituted a significant element within Jewish life and tradition.

Paul's Work in the Gospel

Paul believes that he has been called by God to preach to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5), but this does not mean that he spent his whole day preaching. Acts 18 tells us that he shared a house with fellow tentmakers, Priscilla and Aquila. Most likely they worked together in business using rough goats' hair rather than leather and supported themselves by this means. Tent-making was a trade that could easily be practised by someone travelling to different cities as Paul did. He preferred not to be a burden but to be self-supporting (1 Thess. 2:9), thus angering the Corinthians by refusing to be kept by them. The Western text of Acts 19:9 tells us that Paul taught in the hall of Tyrannus from 11 to 4 each day, i.e. in siesta time, but otherwise he did his evangelism along with his tent-making, which involved hard manual work.

Apostle to the Gentiles

Most likely the Gentiles who became converts were those who already had some acquaintance with Judaism and the God of Israel. There were many degrees of adherence to Judaism by Gentiles. Male converts who accepted circumcision and kept the law were called proselytes, but there were also adherents who for various reasons did not fully commit themselves. Women were generally very favourably attracted to Judaism because of the position accorded to women in it.

Paul as a Pioneer Missionary

Paul chose to work in areas where the gospel had never been preached. His ambition was to be a pioneer missionary. He seems to have had a geographical conception for his mission. He planted communities of believers and charged them with the task of evangelizing their region. He speaks of working in a circle out from Jerusalem, perhaps even intending to evangelize in a circle from Jerusalem to Rome and via Spain to North Africa and hence back to Jerusalem (Rom. 15:19). He used his earlier founded churches as bases from which to launch into new regions of work (so he needed the Roman church as a mission base for new work in Spain).

What kind of people were most likely to be attracted to a new movement such as Paul's? According to Wayne Meeks (*The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*), those whose acquired status was less than their merited status

experienced dissonance between their expectations and their attributed status. Thus people who were 'betwixt and between', people on the move, emancipated slaves, women, groups such as the 'nouveau riche' were likely to be attracted. It is interesting to note the actual diversity among the people mentioned in Paul's letters.

What was the structure of these new groups? The community founder occupied a unique and unassailable position because he was prior in both time and status to the later converts. This was Paul's position. If they met in households as they did, the owner of the house could acquire status possibly because he was rich and so social divisions could result as in the case of Corinth (I belong to Paul, Cephas, Apollos). There may also be divisions between those meeting in different homes such as the household of Stephanas or of Chloe (I Cor. 1:10-17). It is when they assemble together as a church that divisions appear (I Cor. 11:18).