

# Paul: The Very Worst Missionary

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Jamie Wright, popular blogger and former missionary to Costa Rica, calls herself “the Very Worst Missionary.”<sup>1</sup> But I’m convinced Jamie is *not* the worst missionary ever.

Paul was.

Let me explain. I’m *not* saying Paul was a poor minister of the gospel; he’s likely the best we’ve ever had. Nor do I refute his message of God incarnate in Jesus come to redeem the world and establish his kingdom. For almost thirty years, my wife and I have lived and served among an unreached indigenous group in southern Mexico—the Mixtecs—learning their language and culture, sharing this gospel story, and helping them establish healthy churches with local leadership. My calling is as a cross-cultural missionary.

What I *am* saying is that Paul didn’t look much like the missionaries our agencies send out today: He didn’t go through a missionary training program. He didn’t study cultural anthropology or linguistics. And he never learned a new language as part of his ministry. He spread Christianity throughout an entire empire but never crossed any significant linguistic or cultural barriers. Many people today define mission work as crossing significant cultural and linguistic barriers, so where does that leave Paul?

One could argue that for a Jew to work alongside Gentiles was cultural barrier enough. The Jew/Gentile divide is possibly the greatest cultural divide ever experienced, considering that the cultural norms sacred to the Jews were instituted, as they understood it, by God himself. Nevertheless, the pagan culture and its variety of languages were not unfamiliar to Paul; in Tarsus, he would have been surrounded by such. Acts 2 lists fifteen native languages among the Diaspora Jews, and perhaps Paul spoke more than Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. He surely resembled today’s migrants and minority peoples who, through displacement or marginalization, learn by necessity how to broker cross-cultural interactions.

Using Ralph Winter’s scales, Paul’s evangelism would have been E-1 (within one’s own culture) or perhaps E-2 at most (reaching a similar but different

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1 Jamie Wright’s website, accessed September 9, 2019, <https://theveryworstmissionary.com>.

culture), while we (much of the missions movement of the past fifty years) seem to be highlighting E-3 (reaching an extremely different culture).<sup>2</sup>

Are we missing something? In the early 1900s, Roland Allen called our attention to the fact that the missionary methods of his day didn't match Paul's.<sup>3</sup> We have come a long way from how mission was done a century ago, but is there more to learn from Paul's missionary methods? Have we exhausted what he has to teach us in our day?

Over the past fifty years or so, the great missiologists of the sixties and seventies—Donald McGavran, Jacob Loewen, Eugene Nida, William Smalley, Paul Hiebert, and George Patterson, among others—prepared many of us for cross-cultural ministry. McGavran taught us to look for bridges across caste and socioeconomic barriers by applying the homogeneous unit principle. Loewen taught us to resist paternalism by empowering indigenous leadership. Nida introduced us to “dynamic” equivalence in Bible translation, moving us away from literal, wooden translations. Smalley awakened us to the importance of valuing minority languages by developing a writing system for the Hmong. Hiebert used “critical contextualization” to enter into dialogue with people from other cultures—and with the Scriptures—about how the gospel becomes incarnate among them. Patterson introduced us to “church multiplication” through “obedience-oriented education” for pastors. We stand on the shoulders of these great teachers, and I am convinced that the principles they taught us were drawn from Paul.

And yet.

## Paul Was Not a Cross-Cultural Missionary

Unlike missionaries moving into E-3 evangelism today, it seems that Paul never spent a moment worrying about his language proficiency in any of the places he went. And none of the stories in Acts portray him spending time learning about their cultures. He never refrained from sharing his understanding of the Good News until he had some comprehensive grasp of the local situation. He seemed comfortable being an up-front leader for a few weeks or a few years. He had no trouble quickly setting up doctrine and laying down instructions (not on his own authority but on the authority he had earned relationally). He ignored the advice of local elders at least once when he was determined to push on to Jerusalem.

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 15–25.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: World Dominion, 1962).

If Paul were to attend one of our weeklong training sessions about pioneer missions, I imagine he would be somewhat mystified about all our elaborate concern for such issues. I can imagine him foreshadowing Nike, telling us, “Just do it.”

Was Paul’s experience as a migrant what best prepared him for ministry? Was it his ability to engage his own people in new places, creating a platform for reaching others? Did his time as a migrant in multicultural Antioch shape him as a cultural hybrid, a bridge across the Jew/Gentile gap?

God used Paul to catalyze the fervent start of the Christian church throughout the Mediterranean basin. Springboarding off the diaspora of Jews whom he encountered almost everywhere, he reached out to Gentiles, bringing them into this new social experiment and forming a new entity. The growth of this new movement was phenomenal, and, within a few decades, Paul himself stated, “There is no more place for me to work in these regions” (Romans 15:23 NIV). There is no parallel to this anywhere in the history of missions. Certainly we know of people involved in movements of bigger numbers but never anyone who covered such a diverse region with so few resources and so little background as Paul. And yet he didn’t follow some of our own best practices. What do I do with the fact that Paul is the Very Worst Missionary by today’s standards? What does he model in his world that we aren’t applying in ours? Could our globalized world be Paul’s Roman Empire . . . on steroids?

## Migrants Start More Churches Than Missionaries Do

The New Testament mentions churches started by migrants. In fact, Pentecost incorporated three thousand such migrants into the Jerusalem church in one day. The Antioch church was started by men “from Cyprus and Cyrene, [who] went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks” (Acts 11:20 NIV). Paul and Barnabas took journeys that look very much like our globalized migrations, and they left churches established all along the way. Frank Viola in *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*<sup>4</sup> claims that at least eight men—Titus, Timothy, Gaius, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Tychicus, and Trophimus—migrated to and from Ephesus and started churches in other places. Epaphras is connected with the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. And, finally, Paul mentions migrants in Rome (including Priscilla and Aquilla) who established home churches there. Persecution scattered these leaders even more; Acts 18:1–2 places Priscilla and Aquilla in Ephesus. Relying on migration to multiply the church seems to be a viable strategy. It worked for Paul and his companions, anyway.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Viola, *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church: An Extraordinary Guide to Understanding the New Testament* (Escondido, CA: Oneclick Digital, 2012), 114–15.

In southern Mexico among rural populations, including indigenous people, most churches have been started by returning migrants. Mary O'Connor in *Mixtec Evangelicals*<sup>5</sup> observes that the majority of evangelical churches in Mixtec villages in southern Mexico were started by returning Mixtec migrants. There are far more evangelicals among the Mixtec Diaspora than among those who have never left. O'Connor's research supports my own observations in southern Mexico; in some of the places where we have worked, churches started by migrants represent over 90 percent of all church starts. I believe reaching out to migrants is part of God's plan for the expansion of his kingdom and has precedence in Scripture.

### Where Latin American Migrant Churches Go Wrong

But we need to be brutally honest about the state of Latin American migrant churches.

Many of the churches in southern rural Mexico, including those among indigenous people, are not healthy. This doesn't mean people aren't "saved," or that they don't love God, or that God does not love them. These people often face harsh resistance to their faith, sometimes even death, yet they persist. These are faithful Christ followers.

However, they often measure their success by how closely they have copied their distant parent or sending church. If they have no direct connection to a sending church, they inevitably attempt to imitate some urban church, even though their own context is so different.

Matthew 28 commands us to disciple—or redeem—the *ethnes*. This brings honor to marginalized groups, as Jayson Georges's *The 3D Gospel*<sup>6</sup> points out. Yet the gospel preached in Latin America rarely addresses this; while focusing often on God's power over evil spirits and on our salvation from personal sins—indeed a transformational message—it rarely addresses how God redeems culture. This is distressing when we consider how marginalized rural communities often are.

In our early years among the Mixtecs, we were part of a new church born from the work of a returning migrant. In its first year and a half of life, before we arrived, this Mixtec church witnessed the martyrdom of two leaders. The believers lived under the constant threat of further violence. Despite the danger, they joyfully persevered. One of the first songs they translated into Mixtec was "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," and the line "no turning back, no turning back" made it a favorite. However, after we had lived among them

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5 Mary O'Connor, *Mixtec Evangelicals: Globalization, Migration, and Religious Change in a Oaxacan Indigenous group* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016).

6 Jayson Georges, *A 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Fear, and Shame Cultures* (n.p.: Time, 2017).

a while and could speak some Mixtec, we realized that in their church services they never prayed in their own language, only in Spanish. When we asked them why, their heart-wrenching reply was, “Wouldn’t God be offended if we talked to Him in our poor dialect?”

For many indigenous people in Mexico, self-worth and cultural identity are sorely lacking, and the Good News they pursue has yet to showcase a good Father who runs out to receive the returning child with acts and symbols of honor.

Other signs of weakness derive from the migrants’ common belief that their culture is inferior to what they have seen elsewhere, and, as such, is irredeemable. Indigenous churches are often reluctant to value local leadership; they allow outsiders to easily sway them, and they fall prey to all kinds of “winds of doctrines” that blow through the mountains. Their acute sense of poverty can make them prey to whichever spiritual authority from outside brings the greatest economic benefit. They are constantly bombarded by the prosperity preaching so prevalent throughout all of Latin America. They can be legalistic, homing in on a few borrowed rules of external behavior that they don’t truly understand. They can value physical signs of success such as buildings, furniture, and musical instruments. If the parent church in the city has a keyboard and a sound system, the indigenous church is tempted to have two keyboards and speakers the size of coffins. It does not matter that no one can play the instruments well or adjust the sound levels, or that there are only twelve people present. What matters is to be seen conforming to, or even bettering, the patterns established in the “better” world outside.

Especially harmful for these communal people is their acceptance of the traditional Latin American Protestant hostility toward “those idolatrous Catholics,” prejudices often passed on to them by North American missionaries of the past century. This alienates the believers from their social networks, diminishes their witness, and causes heartache and division in small communities, where everyone is dependent on everyone else. Not that the hostility goes only one way. Often it is the town authorities who provoke hostilities, but the situation is usually exacerbated by the attitudes of Protestant leaders.

The saddest part of all this is that second generations of believers rarely continue in a vibrant faith. Unfortunately, they don’t easily fit back into their parents’ former culture, either. They are caught in no-man’s land between the culture their parents rejected and the one they adopted. They fit in neither, because the beliefs and practices of both (folk Catholicism and legalistic evangelicalism) now seem to them outdated.

I do not at all believe that churches started by Mexican migrants must suffer these problems. I think these issues come from the weaknesses and misplaced emphases of our churches and our mission strategies. Again, somehow, we’ve got Paul wrong. For him, the migrant church-planting worked well.

## Few Ever Do a Good Job at Being Incarnational

Perhaps a clue to how we are missing the mark in our mission strategy is the fact that very few people are effective at applying our prime mission strategy—E-3 evangelism. This is my observation in over thirty years of cross-cultural ministry in Central America and Mexico. Of the people who set out to live among an unreached people group and learn their language and live like them, perhaps 20 percent have managed to stay the course more than two years. Of those, another half have dropped out before five years. Maybe half of those left would be able to conduct a complex conversation in the local language. Of these, many have succumbed to pressure and taken on local leadership roles, skewing the group toward their own cultural backgrounds, especially if they were Hispanics relating to indigenous people within their own country.

Extrapolating from our experience with our own denomination and our extensive contacts with many other groups, I would guess that the numbers I've quoted are only somewhat better in the rest of the world. Maybe one out of ten missionaries, rather than Mexico's one in twenty, see healthy indigenous churches start up. K.P. Yohannan claims in *Come, Let's Reach the World* that up to half of all new Western missionaries do not last beyond their first term on the mission field and that it is local missionaries who do 90 percent of all pioneer mission.<sup>7</sup> Another word for indigenous missionaries is . . . migrants.

I do not want to focus on how poorly any particular missionary has accomplished E-3 work. Rather, I wish to point out how incredibly few people are suited to this kind of radical break with the familiar. Considering that it is a very small percent of Christians who attempt long-term mission (I estimate roughly one in three thousand), the numbers translate into an infinitesimally small percent of Christians who successfully take the gospel incarnationally to people who are significantly different from themselves. This is so disheartening, from a modern mission perspective, that I can only conclude that we are missing something. How could it be that God gives us a mandate like the Great Commission but has created only a tiny fraction of us capable of following it well? Might we be interpreting something in the New Testament account incorrectly?

## Conversations, Not Conclusions

I propose some ideas meant to spark conversations among cross-cultural workers:

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<sup>7</sup> K.P. Yohannan, *Come, Let's Reach the World: Partnership in Church Planting Among the Most Unreached* (Carrollton, TX: GFA, 2004), 45.

## 1. *Multicultural Centers*

The 1974 Lausanne Congress called the mission community to reach “gateway cities”—those mega cities that so attract migrants. I think we have yet to fully heed that call. Paul seemed to gravitate toward the “Antiochs,” the “gateway cities” of his day—the places where he, as a migrant himself, would have felt most comfortable. Where he could have ordered a coffee and struck up a conversation with at least one out of five other people in the place. Where the interplay of ideas was commonplace. And, in accord with the general topic of this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, where migrants of all sorts made up the fabric of society—migrants who had contacts with their home regions, who received visits from the home-country family, and who lived in at least two worlds, like Paul himself.

Interactions in a large city are mostly conducted in its trade language and in its marketplaces. There, everyone is used to relating to different peoples and finding ways to live together. In urban immigrant communities, people collectively find ways to bridge their native culture to the new culture. Of course, prejudices and mistreatments abound, but people learn to share their urban spaces. Paul entered this milieu and, perhaps unawares, conducted a socio-religious experiment that so easily could have backfired. But it did not backfire. It took off. And spread. Like nothing had ever done before.

Evidently, God used new believers in the urban centers of the Roman Empire, whether through their return to the margins of their world or through their arrival at the centers, to establish churches throughout the entire region. But unlike the migrant-birther churches of my experience, the churches mentioned in the New Testament thrived. What caused this difference?

### **Proposals:**

1. Concentrate on gateway cities with many immigrants.
2. Look for situations where the exchange of ideas is easily accepted (third spaces?). Many immigrants attend educational institutions. They also almost always make up the unskilled labor class. Although those groups are harder to bond with, they are key to reaching immigrant populations.
3. Position yourself to be influential: teacher, culture broker, labor organizer, etcetera.
4. Be open to travel to migrants’ home regions.
5. Be hospitable to their visitors from those areas.
6. Recognize that migrants create hybrid or “third cultures.” They may be perceived as threats to local traditions or lifestyles, triggering rejection and trauma.

## 2. *Simplicity*

Whatever structures and beliefs Paul established in new churches had to have been simple, because new believers absorbed the basics quickly. When Paul had to leave, sometimes after only a few weeks, the group left behind could conduct its own affairs and multiply itself and its leaders independently. However you interpret Paul's injunction to avoid naming new believers as leaders (1 Tim 3), the reality is that those commissioned as leaders in the earliest churches were relatively new in the faith, maybe weeks or months old. That could only have been possible if both the doctrines and practices that Paul established were simple.

When doctrines and practices are simple, there is enough creative energy left over to adapt to local situations. Their original patterns, while necessarily being somewhat "foreign," can be overlaid with different languages and cultural manifestations. On the contrary, our experience of outside missionaries starting churches is that the ideas and patterns they first present are so complex and unfamiliar that the new believers spend all their spiritual energy just trying to imitate what they were given. They rarely adapt after that.

### **Proposals**

1. Encourage local believers to shape a simple creedal statement based on the life and teachings of Jesus. Keep it simple enough that a semiliterate adult who speaks the trade language can grasp it in a few weeks if they come from such cultures.
2. Focus on the work of Jesus, who brings honor to the overlooked.
3. Prefer narratives to propositions—first Jesus, more Jesus, and only then a little Paul.
4. Gather people, but don't be the visible leader. Found a plurality of elders, and model sessions that can be imitated by the next gathering. Act as if you are going to die in three weeks.
5. Quickly entrust local leaders with all tangible roles, such as administering sacraments, public prayers, teaching, and worship (music).
6. Focus on simple obedience (love God and each other), not intellectual statements (Trinity, the three Omnis). Give practical examples. Model everything.
7. Focus on early church practice. (See George Patterson's summary of the seven basic commands of Christ, of New Testament practices, and of the authority these have in relationship to human tradi-

tions<sup>8</sup>).

8. Focus on teaching that can be imitated easily—based on narrative and openness to group interpretation.
9. Trust the Holy Spirit to lead believers to simply obey Jesus and creatively respond to him as they meet him in the Scriptures. Work together toward this primary goal.
10. Expect some new believers, especially heads of households, to effectively share the Good News with extended family and friends among the diaspora as well as in their hometowns. Encourage their leadership, showing them how God has gifted them to evangelize their own people.

### 3. *Ideal Ambassadors*

Mission agencies and sending churches could send missionaries who look more like Paul—multicultural and comfortable in our fluid world.

#### **Proposals**

1. Mentor and recruit individuals from churches that thrive in multicultural centers.
2. Provide all training for potential missionaries in multicultural settings.
3. Abandon traditional requirements that favor the dominant culture.
4. Strengthen bivocational skills useful in multicultural settings.

### 4. *Neither Jew nor Gentile*

Migrants are often the best positioned to take the gospel to their native culture. That does not mean they won't face challenges. Like Paul, they may experience rejection by both "Jews" and "Gentiles." Or they may adopt a dominant culture's negative attitudes toward the marginalized. Or they may try to "go back" and find, sadly, that home is no longer "home." There is no magic wand to make kingdom work easy. Just—sometimes—easier.

#### **Proposals**

1. Never assume migrants will move smoothly into "home" or "new"

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<sup>8</sup> George Patterson and Richard Scoggins, *Church Multiplication Guide Revised: The Miracle of Church Reproduction* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 10–16.

cultures.

2. Build trusting relationships through existing networks.
3. Actively expunge superiority attitudes (Phil 2:5–8)

I have no wish to discourage people called to extreme cross-cultural mission. What I say here shouldn't diminish their sense of calling. Those with such extreme calls can bear much fruit for the kingdom, and we need to mobilize the workers that God has gifted in this way. My wife and I continue a full-time ministry of training non-indigenous Mexicans for such ministry.

But I do wish to add options for serving in the kingdom that are more likely to succeed. I sense that for every missionary who makes the radical model work, there are hundreds more who could effectively join with God to establish his kingdom closer to home.

I believe that the narrative of Acts and the letters of Paul are meant to guide us, perhaps even direct us. We are not tied to the practices of the first Christian church, but we should certainly *know* those practices and have good reason if we abandon them. In other words, we should *know why*, in *today's* mission world, Paul is the Very Worst Missionary.