



Apostle on Trial: Building Congregations on Resurrection Hope

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I. "LIKE A SKILLED MASTER BUILDER I LAID A FOUNDATION"

PAUL WAS A DOER, A PREACHER, A BUILDER, AND A TENTMAKING MISSIONARY on the move. An examination of his ministry, particularly his trials, provides an ongoing lesson for those who follow him in building congregations.

Paul wrote persuasive letters pointing his congregations beyond himself to God, "who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." His investment in their fidelity reflects the zeal with which he poured out his life: "It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain" (Phil 2:12-18). Paul was not afraid of hard work. His salvation did not depend upon his success, but he hoped his labors in his congregations would be validated in the judgment. "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!" (1 Thess 2:19-20).

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Builders of congregations today can learn from the model of Paul presented in Acts. Paul laid the foundation of the congregation on the resurrection of Jesus, which became also the subject of his proclamation and the basis of his hope. Paul gives his work up to the judgment of God, confident that the work is of God, done for the sake of Christ who died for all.

Paul sought to do good work. In a famous essay published in 1912, Roland Allen observed the profound faith and cultural wisdom of Paul's missionary methods in contrast to the colonizing strategies of nineteenth-century missionaries.¹ Paul trusted God and entrusted indigenous leaders with developing the congregations he founded. His good work as a missionary included letting go, confident that God who "began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). He moved on, and the people had to assume responsibility to lead their communities. Then Paul wrote them pastoral letters with a fundraising appeal for the saints in Jerusalem.²

Paul was confident of his work as founder. "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it" (1 Cor 3:10). He warned his successors, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (v. 11). He also believed that all edifices would be tried in the last judgment with rewards and risks to follow: "The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire" (vv. 13-15).

Paul is not describing some kind of "works righteousness." Even novice builders have no excuse to hide from constructing something. Their salvation is not at risk. But according to the grace of God given to each, they are called into the work of Christ to build his church (Matt 16:18). The issue here is not "faithfulness" versus "success." This is the faith of apostolic mission in action.

Paul is also building a tradition here, inviting others into a succession of apostolic mission. In her essay on "Congregations and the Bearing of Traditions," Dorothy C. Bass draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a living tradition as a "historically extended, socially embodied argument" or the pursuit of identified "goods" or "virtues."³ Paul's own "argument," building on the foundation of Jesus Christ, entails a distinctive social embodiment, the body of Christ. Whatever variations time and contexts require, the congregation built on the foundation of Paul's preaching must continue to manifest the gospel of Jesus, "who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). Paul's letters call his churches to such evangelical embodiment.

The apostles themselves are also embodied bearers of the gospel tradition, "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). The congregations they "build" may be their heavenly crown, but they put their own bodies on the line here and now

¹Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (London: Word Dominion, 1912). See the discussion in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) 123, 379.

²Dieter Georgi, *Die Geschichte der Kollekte des Paulus für Jerusalem* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1965).

³In *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 174.

(Rom 12:1-2), not to earn salvation, but to manifest their sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

The Acts of the Apostles is a reconstruction of the living tradition of apostolic mission, “building” Paul’s “embodied argument” through a literary dramatization of the apostle’s witness. Like the Greco-Roman historians, Luke composed condensed scenes and shaped the speeches of leading characters to communicate their meaning to the reader. Luke-Acts presents Paul as one added late to the original twelve “apostles” (Luke 9:1; 22:30; Acts 1:15-26; 14:14) and devotes over half of the second volume to his “acts” (Greek: *pravxei*”, a term used of the glorious *deeds* of kings and rulers). In accord with the risen Lord’s word in Acts 9:15-16, Paul in Acts often appears on trial before “Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.” This is the apostle’s “opportunity to testify” (Luke 21:13).

What points are scored in Luke’s account of the apostle on trial? What are the lessons of this portrayal for those who build congregations on the foundation Paul laid?

II. “IT IS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD THAT I AM ON TRIAL”

In Acts 24, Paul stands trial before the Roman governor Felix and the high priest Ananias. His work with congregations is not directly at issue. Acts speaks less of Paul’s declaration of justification and more of his witness to Jesus’ resurrection as Messiah.⁴ Paul is accused as “a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple” (24:5-6).

Not at all, declares Paul, but “according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything written down according to the law and the prophets” (24:14). Recalling an earlier trial before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:9), he announces, “It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today” (24:21).

This is not what Felix thought the trial was about, but Acts knows that every apostle must be “a witness to the resurrection” (1:22). On trial or not, the apostle is always an emissary of the risen Christ (see also Rom 1:1-6; Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1). Paul’s earlier appeal to the resurrection was, in part, a diversion to divide the Pharisees from the Sadducees (23:6-10). But much more is at stake in the apostle’s testimony.

In the Acts narrative, Paul’s witness to the resurrection puts both Israel’s leaders and the Romans themselves on trial. Luke’s earlier recounting of the resurrection of Jesus was already infused with Isaiah’s conviction that God will restore weakened Israelites to call them to witness in a trial of the nations of the

⁴Some interpreters even suggest that Luke thus compromised the foundation Paul laid, e.g., Philipp Vielhauer, “On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts,” *Studies in Luke Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 33-50. In an essay on “The Missionary Stance of Paul in I Corinthians 9 and in Acts” (*Studies*, 199), Günther Bornkamm asserted that “the loss of the message of justification in Acts” is “closely connected” with “the surrender of Paul’s eschatological understanding of history.” That judgment obscures Luke’s eschatology by reducing it to an historical scheme.

earth (Isa 43:8-12; 45:20-24; 49:6; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:6-8). In declaring that he believes “everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets” (24:14), the apostle thus testifies from the scriptures that the resurrection is an ordeal of the nations (see Luke 20:27-40; 24:26-27, 46; Acts 2:24-36).

As the speeches in Acts 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 17 also attest, the resurrection of Jesus is the vindication of the crucified, indicting all who were complicit in his death but giving repentance, forgiveness, and restoration in the name of Jesus Christ. When the apostles Peter and John left court in Acts 4, they declared that, in the light of the Messiah’s resurrection, “Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel” are tried and convicted by the witness of scripture as gathered together against God’s “holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed” (Acts 4:27). The resurrection reveals God’s verdict. Although Jesus’ opponents acted in ignorance (see Luke 23:34; Acts 3:17; 17:30), they are now judged to be enemies of God (see Acts 5:38-39; 17:30-31).

Paul’s own words make a similar point: “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8).

In Luke’s dramatization, the witness of the apostle “about the resurrection of the dead” becomes a public hearing, disclosing the powers opposed to God’s reign in Christ. All who build on the foundation of Paul’s mission sense the challenge to the principalities and powers of the “living tradition” of Luke’s portrayal of the apostle on trial.

When you are an apostle on trial, following Luke’s tradition of the apostle as witness to the resurrection, your testimony contains within it the indictment of the forces opposed to God’s merciful reign in Christ. As you are building a congregation upon the foundation laid in Jesus Christ, like Luke’s Paul, you are on trial for the resurrection. The resurrection calls the world to repent of enmity to God, to turn to God in hope. The congregation you build is a public embodiment of your apostolic testimony before the world and God.

III. “I HAVE A HOPE IN GOD”

Paul’s testimony before Felix in Acts 24 is a partial representation of the argument he embodies. In this account of Paul’s arrest and trial, Luke even fails to mention Christ Jesus directly until Paul is sent for again “some days later” (24:24). Paul’s next two defenses before King Agrippa, Bernice, and the Roman governor Festus in Acts 25-26, however, make it clear that Paul’s case is not just about resurrection in general. The resurrection of the Messiah as “first...from the dead” is the basis for proclaiming “light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:23, see Luke 2:32; Isa 49:6). And all of these scenes portray the irrepressible hope of the apostle on trial. The future belongs to God.

Why is Paul making his defense “cheerfully” (24:10)? How dare he say to King Agrippa, “I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains” (26:29)? Is Paul out of his mind, as Festus declared (26:24)? Is this a triumphal optimism, denying the

reality of human pathos and compromising the theology of the cross?⁵ The empires of the ancient and modern world are fueled by enthusiastic optimism for their own ways of contriving and constructing the world, but hope is grounded in an enduring conviction of what is true and therefore right.

Those who are building on the foundation laid by the apostle need to know how Luke's portrayal of the apostle on trial represents Paul's tradition or "embodied argument." The literary complex of Luke-Acts illuminates three crucial features of Paul's hope in God, and each has profound consequences for Christian communities that continue to enact the apostle's missionary purpose or calling.

First, repentance is not merely a religious requirement, but God's gift both to Israel and to the Gentiles. For their part, the Roman order could wish the Jews and Christians would repent of their infidelity to the empire's virtue and that Paul the "agitator among all Jews...and ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" would cease and desist. The officials of the Jewish temple had reason to resent Paul's resurrection hope as a threat (see Acts 4). But Paul's confidence is not grounded in his own appeal, but in what God has done.

Luke consistently links the "gift of the Holy Spirit" to the opportunity for "the entire house of Israel" to turn or return to God in repentance (Acts 2:36-38). The gift of the Holy Spirit is again the sign that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 10:45-47; 11:17-18). So also the "command" for repentance from idolatry, which Luke's Paul announces in Athens on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus, is directed to those who are "offspring" of Israel's God, although they did not know it (17:22-31). Paul's "cheerful" defense before the Jewish high priest and the Roman governor allows the apostle neither self-righteous superiority toward Israel nor hostility toward a dominant pagan culture. Like Peter in Acts 10-11, Paul, obedient to God, is hopeful in extending God's saving word extravagantly, even to adversaries.

This hope has profound consequences for building Christian communities into living bodies. Those communities will have a distinctive mission to express a divine generosity that no mere mortal would dare to extend or be capable of offering. Building on the foundation of Jesus Christ means enacting the conviction that God has already granted mercy to evident enemies in and outside the community of faith (see also Rom 5:10). Such behavior does not arise from a power inherent in the witnesses; it derives its strength from their hope in God.

Secondly, Paul's hope is not optimism or denial of reality. His "hope in God" is based in the resurrection of Jesus. In Luke-Acts, this hope is infused with God's promises to Israel (see also Rom 15:8). Luke's narrative is replete with faithful Israelites who share this hope: Simeon "looking forward to the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25), Anna and those with her "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38), Joseph of Arimathea "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of

⁵Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 692, argues that this scene makes a self-justifying claim that "Christianity is not an inconspicuous event any longer, but a factor in world history....They are preparing themselves—Paul is the model!—to step out of their corner into the world of history and culture."

God" (23:51), the travelers to Emmaus who "had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" (24:21), and "the apostles whom he had chosen" who asked the risen Christ, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The resurrection of Jesus is the sign that all God's promises will be kept (see also 2 Cor 1:20), indicating, as Peter declared, that "the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21) has been inaugurated.

To build a community on this confidence is to light a candle of hope in God, refusing either to claim personal triumph or to capitulate to despair. Lives, families, and congregations can be torn apart by vicious forces. Whether facing unjust imprisonments (2 Corinthians 6) or confronting the subjection of the creation itself to futility (Rom 8:18-25), Paul laid the foundation for the hope in which "we were saved" not in personal courage but in the reliability of God's promises confirmed in the resurrection. And Acts agrees. So also, whatever edifice a church builder constructs acquires its grandeur in witness to this hope.

Thirdly, the apostle's hope and suffering are intertwined with the necessity of the scriptural promises. Such "necessary" suffering manifests neither fatalism nor a heroic spirituality of penance, not masochism but God's way of mercy in a willful world. The scriptural promises require the suffering of the Messiah, and the apostle follows his ways. Chosen by the Lord Jesus to "bring my name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15), Paul's calling was immediately linked with "how much he *must* suffer for the sake of my name" (9:16). The apostle's suffering is necessary just as Jesus' suffering was in accord with "Moses and all the prophets" (Luke 24:26-27). Such passion signifies the constancy of God's compassion, and the apostle is thankful to be worthy to participate (Acts 5:41; 14:22).

The apostle's hope in God sends all who would build on this foundation into the scriptural quarries of God's promises to Israel. Far from shame or pride in suffering, the apostle on trial manifests God's loving way to save the world. God's peculiar mercy provokes adversaries and discloses thin or thick legitimations of authority. Those who suffer truly for the sake of the name extend the love of Christ, sustained by hope in God.

The practices of passion and compassion are difficult for builders. People who are doers want to get on with it, to minimize profound and difficult realities. In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch sought to emulate the apostle by seeking martyrdom: "Suffer me to be eaten by beasts, through whom I can attain to God." Ignatius was enacting the embodiment of the tradition in the person of the bishop: "Its bishop shall be Jesus Christ alone" (Ign. *Rom.* 4:1; 9:1). On the other hand, some read Acts as reducing the apostle's suffering to pious example overcome with optimism, as if suffering were trivial and Christian history merely the glorious epic of Christendom. But neither personally enacted suffering nor denial of the reality of suffering grasps Paul's deep apostolic hope in God.

To construct Paul's argument in an embodied congregation, the builder must read the script as God's. This passion and compassion are not mere marketing methods in a lonely world, but glimpses of the heart of God. The God who justifies

the ungodly calls and sends prophets and apostles to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous sinners, fortunes, egos, and rulers in order that this message of mercy may find its public voice. And the community built on this foundation shares the vocation and commission of the apostle to “make Christ known” in its witness to the powers and in love for the world.

IV. “I DO MY BEST ALWAYS TO HAVE A CLEAR CONSCIENCE TOWARD GOD AND ALL PEOPLE”

In the death of the Messiah, God confronted sin. In raising him from the dead, God justified the ungodly (Rom 4:25) and inaugurated the apostolic mission of the church by sending the Holy Spirit (Acts 1-2). Freed from self-justification, those called to build congregations proceed to their work in the confidence that their labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58). The logic and legitimation of their practice rest on the resurrection.

This justification leaves no room for injustice, even on the part of those who appear to have no power. Facing an evidently bleak future in chains, Paul still holds himself accountable to a high standard of moral responsibility. The apostle in Acts knows that he is an agent of God’s reign and will yet face the judgment of the resurrection. He refuses to indulge in self-pity or assume the cloak of a victim. Maintaining “a clear conscience toward God and all people” leads further to discussions about “justice, self-control, and the coming judgment,” even when the procurator loses his nerve (Acts 24:16, 25).

Because God raised Jesus, building the body of Christ is faithful work. This work does not save the builder. That is already accomplished. The salvation of others is also the work of God, but the builder is invited to participate in that enterprise along with all those who build further on the foundation. God is inclusive, even when the church is less so (see Acts 6). Serving the mission of God, the apostolic agent is continually on trial before many courts of judgment. Vulnerable to self-interest and to charges of insurrection against powers within and beyond the community, the builder’s work is continually and finally on trial. And the standard of truth to which the testimony will be held is already clear.

“Like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation” on the resurrection of Christ.

“It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial,” not my achievement.

“I have a hope in God,” a hope tempered in the compassion of Christ crucified.

“I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people,” because Christ died for all.

Paul’s self-presentation and Acts’ dramatization proclaim God’s saving work. They also attest how the resurrection tests the public, constructive work of apostolic mission and gives enduring hope to the builder, a hope in God. ⊕