

Strategic Points

It is quite impossible to maintain that St Paul deliberately planned his journeys beforehand, selected certain strategic points at which to establish his churches and then actually carried out his designs. The only argument, which seems to support that theory, is the use of the word 'the work' with regard to his first missionary journey in Acts 13. 2, 14. 26, 15. 38. In Acts 13. 2 it is said, 'The Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for *the work* whereunto I have called them'. In 14. 26 we are told that the apostles returned to Antioch 'from whence they had been committed to the grace of God for *the work* which they had fulfilled'. And in 15. 38 St Paul complains that Mark 'withdrew from them in Pamphylia and went not with them to *the work*'. These words taken together seem naturally to imply (a) that the apostles started out with a definite plan before them, (b) that they actually carried out their plans, and (c) that St Mark's fault lay in the fact that he had deserted a work which he had undertaken to do.

But the difficulties in the way of that interpretation are very great. If we accept Professor Ramsay's theory that the churches to which the Epistle to the Galatians was written were the churches in South Galatia, which St Paul founded on this journey, then there can be no dispute that St Paul did not design to visit them when he started out from Syria, for in that epistle he distinctly states that he preached to them because he was either driven to them or detained amongst them by an infirmity of the flesh.¹

The most natural explanation of the return of John Mark from Perga is that he turned back because he saw that after the crisis at Paphos St Paul was become the real leader of the mission in the place of his own cousin, Barnabas, and was prepared both to preach outside the synagogue to Gentiles with greater freedom than he had anticipated, and to admit Gentiles into fellowship on terms which he was hardly proposing to accept. He saw too that St Paul was proposing to penetrate into regions more remote, perhaps more dan-

¹ Gal. 4. 13.

gerous, than he had expected. In other words there was at Perga a real change both in the direction and in the character of the mission.

On these grounds it seems more reasonable to suppose that the words 'the work' are used in a general sense of the objects of their journey rather than of any defined sphere of action. But whatever view we take of this first journey, it is perfectly clear that in the second journey St Paul was not following any predetermined route. If he had any definite purpose when he left Antioch it was to go through Cilicia and South Galatia to Ephesus. It is expressly stated that he tried to preach in Asia and was forbidden by the Holy Ghost, and that he then attempted to go into Bithynia and again was forbidden by the Spirit.¹ So he found himself at Troas not knowing where he was to go, until he was directed by a vision to Macedonia. Having preached in Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea he was apparently driven out of Macedonia and fled to Athens² not, as it seems, with any intention of establishing himself there as a preacher, but simply as a retreat until circumstances would allow him to return to Macedonia. When he was expelled from Athens he went to Corinth, either because that was the most convenient place from whence to keep in touch with Macedonia, or because he was directed thither by the Spirit. In all this there is little sign of premeditation or deliberate design.

Only one other place remains at which St Paul established the church before his first imprisonment, viz. Ephesus, and it appears from Acts 18. 19 that he touched at that place in the ordinary course of his journey to Jerusalem, and that, finding the people ready to listen to him, he promised to return again.

On this third journey St Paul apparently laid his plans and executed them as they were designed so far as Ephesus, but after that he was so uncertain in his movements as to lay himself open to an accusation of vacillation.³ It is during this journey that we find the first expressed plan for future work. Whilst at Ephesus, 'Paul purposed in the spirit when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia to go to Jerusalem saying: After I have been there, I must also see Rome'.⁴

¹ Acts 16. 6, 7.

² Ramsay says that he 'left Beroea with no fixed plan'.—*St Paul the Traveller*, p. 234.

³ 2 Cor. 1. 15, 18.

⁴ Acts 19. 21.

I cannot help concluding then from this brief review that St Paul did not deliberately plan his missionary tours, but nevertheless there are certain facts in the history of his missionary journeys which demand attention.

1. Both St Luke and St Paul speak constantly of the provinces rather than of the cities. Thus St Paul was forbidden to preach the word in Asia,¹ he was called from Troas not to Philippi, or to Thessalonica, but to Macedonia.² Speaking of the collection for the saints at Jerusalem St Paul says that he boasted that Achaia was ready a year ago.³ The suggestion is that in St Paul's view the unit was the province rather than the city.

2. Secondly, his work was confined within the limits of Roman administration. It is perfectly clear that in preaching in South Galatia, St Paul was evangelizing the Roman province next in order to his native province of Cilicia, in which there were already Christian churches. Between these two, there lay the territory of Lycaonia Antiochi, and across this territory St Paul must have passed when he went from Tarsus to Lystra and Iconium. Yet we are never told that he made any attempt to preach in that region. From this fact we must certainly infer that St Paul did deliberately consider the strategic value of the provinces and places in which he preached. The territory of Antiochus—Lycaonia Antiochi—was not so important from the view of the propagation of the Gospel as the region of Lystra. St Paul deliberately chose the one before the other.

3. Thirdly, St Paul's theory of evangelizing a province was not to preach in every place in it himself, but to establish centres of Christian life in two or three important places from which the knowledge might spread into the country round. This is important, not as showing that he preferred to preach in a capital rather than in a provincial town or in a village, but because he intended his congregation to become at once a centre of light. Important cities may be made the graves of a mission as easily as villages. There is no particular virtue in attacking a centre or establishing a church in an important place unless the church established in the important place is a church possessed of sufficient life to be a source of light to the whole country round.

¹ Acts 16. 6.

² Acts 16. 9, 10, cf. Acts 18. 5, 19. 22, 2 Cor. 1. 16, 2. 13, 75, Phil. 4. 15, etc.

³ 2 Cor. 9. 2.

It is not enough for the church to be established in a place where many are coming and going unless the people who come and go not only learn the Gospel, but learn it in such a way that they can propagate it. It has often happened that a mission has been established in an important city, and the surrounding country has been left untouched so far as the efforts of the native Christians have been concerned, because the Gospel was preached in such a form that the native convert who himself received it did not understand how to spread it, nor realize that it was entrusted to him for that purpose. By establishing the church in two or three centres St Paul claimed that he had evangelized the whole province. Ten years after his first start from Antioch, he told the Romans that he had 'fully preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem and round about Illyricum',¹ and that he had 'no more place in these parts'.² In that single sentence we have the explanation and the justification of St Paul's establishment of the churches in important centres in a province. When he had occupied two or three centres he had really and effectually occupied the province.

All the cities, or towns, in which he planted churches were centres of Roman administration, of Greek civilization, of Jewish influence, or of some commercial importance.

(1) Just as he refused to preach in native states and passed through large towns in the territory of Antiochus without stopping to preach, so within the Roman province he passed through native provincial towns like Misthia or Vasada in order to preach in Lystra and Derbe—military posts in which there was a strong Roman element. Professor Ramsay has shown that there is in the Acts an apparent intention to contrast the conduct meted out to St Paul by local provincial authorities with that which he received at the hands of Roman officials and to present the Romans in the light of protectors of the Apostle against the persecutions of the Jews.³ No doubt in selecting as the sphere of his work the centres of Roman administration, St Paul was led by the desire to obtain for himself and for his people the security afforded by a strong government. He felt that as a Roman citizen he could in the last resort expect and receive the protection of Roman officials against the fanatical

¹ Rom. 15. 19.

² Rom. 15. 23.

³ *St Paul the Traveller*, pp. 304 sqq.

violence of the Jews; but he did not only seek Roman protection. He found under the Roman government something more than peace and security of travel. He found not only toleration and an open field for his preaching, there was also in the mere presence of Roman officials an influence which materially assisted his work. The idea of the world-wide empire which they represented, the idea of the common citizenship of men of many different races in that one empire, the strong authority of the one law, the one peace, the breaking down of national exclusiveness, all these things prepared men's minds to receive St Paul's teaching of the Kingdom of Christ, and of the common citizenship of all Christians in it.

(2) The centres in which St Paul established his churches were all centres of Greek civilization. Even at Lystra, half the inscriptions which have been discovered are Greek, while the other half are Latin. Everywhere Roman government went hand in hand with Greek education. This education provided St Paul with his medium of communication. There is no evidence of any attempt to translate the Scriptures into the provincial dialects of Asia Minor.¹ St Paul preached in Greek and wrote in Greek, and all his converts who read at all were expected to read the Scriptures in Greek.² For St Paul, the one language was as important as the one government.

Moreover, the influence of Greek civilization was an influence which tended to the spread of general education, and Christianity from the very first was a religion of education. From the first, Christians were learners. They were expected to be able to give a reason for the hope that was in them. They were expected to learn something, if only a very little, of the Old Testament and of the stock proofs that Jesus was the Messiah. They were expected to know something of the life and teaching of Christ, and something of Christian doctrine. Before very long it became a common argument of the Christian apologists that amongst Christians, 'tradesmen, slaves, and old women knew how to give some account of God and did not believe without evidence'. It was from the widespread influence of Greek education that they were able to acquire this, and it was to places where that education was established that St Paul naturally turned.

¹ Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller*, p. 132.

² Has this fact any bearing upon the multiplication of dialect Prayer Books, which tend to perpetuate divisions? E.g. in Chota Nagpur or the South Seas?

(3) Nearly all the places in which St Paul established churches were centres of Jewish influence. St Paul, as a Jew, was at home in the Jewry. He did not enter these great cities as a mere stranger. He came as a member of a family, as a member of a powerful and highly privileged association. Under the Roman Government the Jews enjoyed singular advantages. Their religion was definitely recognized. They had liberty to administer their common funds in their own way and to administer their own laws. They were exempt from the obligation to share in the worship of the Emperor, they enjoyed freedom from a military service in which it was evident they could not take part without violating their religion. They had many other privileges of less importance, but of considerable advantage.

When, therefore, St Paul took up his residence in the Jewry or entered the synagogue on the Sabbath Day, he had for the moment a singular opportunity. He had an audience provided for him which understood the underlying principles of his religion, and was familiar with the texts on which he based his argument. When he went out into the city, he went as a member of a community which was associated in the minds of all men with the idea of a very strict, if unreasonable, observance of religion. Men would naturally expect from him as a Jew an unbending stiffness towards every form of idolatry, and the unhesitating maintenance as a part of his religious system of a strict code of morals. Much as the Greek and Roman world disliked and spurned the Jew, yet the religion of the Jew was exercising a very wide influence and no small attractive power over the minds of some of the best and most thoughtful of the people.

(4) St Paul established his churches at places which were centres of the world's commerce. They were cities which occupied an important place as leaders of the provinces. They were foremost in every movement of policy or thought. They were sometimes almost ludicrously jealous of one another and strained all their powers in emulous rivalry to maintain their position as leaders. But they were leaders, and they felt it their duty to lead. They represented something larger than themselves and they looked out into a wider world than the little provincial town which was wholly absorbed in its own petty interests. Thus they were centres of unity, realizing that they had a responsibility for a world outside themselves. Even the settlers in Lystra and Derbe on the borders of a province realized that they

were pioneers of a civilization which they were to extend to the barbarous country round. They lived in a life that was larger than their own. They could not live wholly to themselves.

Nor were these cities only centres of their own provinces. Through some of them the commerce of the world passed. They were the great marts where the material and intellectual wealth of the world was exchanged. They were bound to the whole Empire by great roads of which they were the keys. In their streets the busiest and most fervent life of the Empire hurried to and fro. How constant that intercourse was we learn not only from the history of the early churches: we cannot forget that Phrygian, who in his single life made the journey from Phrygia to Rome no less than seventy-two times.¹ These places were not only centres of unity, they were points in the circumference of a larger unity.

Thus at first sight it seems to be a rule which may be unhesitatingly accepted that St Paul struck at the centres of Roman administration, the centres of Hellenic civilization, the centres of Jewish influence, the keys of the great trade routes.

We must not, however, allow ourselves to lay over-much stress on these characteristics of the places at which St Paul established his churches. They were common to a great many towns and cities on the great highways of the Empire. If the Apostle had gone to Laodicea or to Dyrrachium the same remarks might have been made about those places. In Macedonia, Beroea was not as important a place as Pella. St Paul plainly did not select where he would preach simply on grounds like these: he was led of the Spirit, and when we speak of his strategic centres, we must recognize that they were natural centres; but we must also recognize that for missionary work they were strategic centres because he made them such. They were not centres at which he must stop, but centres from which he might begin; not centres into which life drained but centres from which it spread abroad.

We have often heard in modern days of concentrated missions at great centres. We have often heard of the importance of seizing strategic points. But there is a difference between our seizing of strategic centres and St Paul's. To seize a strategic centre we need not only a man capable of recognizing it, but a man capable of seizing it. The seizing of strategic points implied a strategy. It is part

¹ Harnack, *Expansion*, trans. Moffatt, 2nd Edit. vol. i. p. 20, note 2.

of a plan of attack upon the whole country. Concentrated missions at strategic centres, if they are to win the province, must be centres of evangelistic life. In great cities are great prisons as well as great railway stations. Concentrated missions may mean concentrated essence of control or concentrated essence of liberty: a concentrated mission may be a great prison or a great market: it may be a safe in which all the best intellect of the day is shut up, or it may be a mint from which the coin of new thought is put into circulation. A great many of our best men are locked up in strategic centres: if once they get in they find it hard to get out. At many of the strategic points where we have established our concentrated missions it is noticeable that the church rather resembles a prison or a safe or a swamp into which the best life of the country round is collected than a mint or a spring or a railway station from which life flows out into the country round. We are sometimes so enamoured with the strategic beauty of a place that we spend our time in fortifying it whilst the opportunity for a great campaign passes by unheeded or neglected.

St Paul's centres were centres indeed. He seized strategic points because he had a strategy. The foundation of churches in them was part of a campaign. In his hands they became the sources of rivers, mints from which the new coin of the Gospel was spread in every direction. They were centres from which he could start new work with new power. But they were this not only because they were naturally fitted for this purpose, but because his method of work was so designed that centres of intellectual and commercial activity became centres of Christian activity. St Paul was less dependent upon these natural advantages than we generally suppose. We have seen that he did not start out with any definite design to establish his churches in this place or in that. He was led as God opened the door; but wherever he was led he always found a centre, and seizing upon that centre he made it a centre of Christian life. How he did this we shall see in the following chapters.

