



ST. PAUL AS GLOBAL STRATEGIST

By Earl F. Palmer

Such a Windy Place

Such a windy place
To find the water and food that will
Last and give me time while dust
And leaves, ideas and words, blow constantly in my face

How can I pause and think
wonder and ask
decide and do
in such a windy place

It takes a Good Shepherd with skill and will
who loves his sheep on a thousand hills
while we pause and think
wonder and ask
decide and do
in such a windy place

— Earl F. Palmer

How do we survive and thrive on a windy hillside? How do we make a difference for good in such a place, where everything is under the stress of the winds of change and even winds of fury? We need some models of hope, and for me, one name from the midpoint of the first century stands out.

St. Paul's life is something of a case study of what it means to be a faithful "global strategist." Consider just one series of events in the Apostle's extensive travels. He had been through Roman provinces of Asia (Turkey) and Macedonia (Greece) collecting funds to help the citizens in Jerusalem, who were feeling increasing pressure from the empire. When he brought the funds to Jerusalem, some of his companions were of Greek ancestry and that fact posed a

full-scale crisis for the Apostle. Luke narrates for us what happened next: notice the ways that Paul acted and reacted to the dangerous events that ensued.

The visit began peacefully at the start, but within a week, the atmosphere became deadly: "When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized

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him, shouting, 'Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.'" They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they presumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple. While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that Jerusalem was in an uproar. Immediately he took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them, and the crowd stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune arrested Paul, and ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

But then Paul asked the tribune a seemingly simple question, "May I say something to you?" The tribune replied, "Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness." Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people." The tribune obliged.

Paul then stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence. Addressing them in Hebrew, he said, "Brothers and fathers, listen to the defense that I now make before you." When they heard him speaking Hebrew, they became even quieter. "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia," Paul announced, and then proceeded to recount his Road to Damascus experience (Acts 21:27-22:16).

Then he said, "The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name." Up to this point they had listened to him, but then they turned, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." For his

part, the tribune's response to the situation was to order that Paul be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for the outcry against him.

But when they had tied him up, Paul remarked to a centurion, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he scurried to the tribune, asking, "What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen." The tribune came and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes," came the reply. Immediately those who were about to "examine" him drew back, as did the tribune.

Since he still wanted to find out why Paul was being accused, the next day the tribune released him and ordered the chief priests and the entire council to meet. He brought Paul down and had him stand before them (Acts 22:22-30). This meeting went badly for Paul. And to make matters worse a group of conspirators then began scheming to assassinate Paul by surprise ambush.

But the son of Paul's sister caught wind of the plot and reported it to Paul and the tribune. So the tribune summoned two of the centurions and said, "Get ready to leave by nine o'clock tonight for Caesarea with two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Felix the governor."

As they were told, the soldiers went to Caesarea and delivered Paul and a letter of explanation. On reading the letter, the governor asked what province Paul belonged to, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive." The upshot was that the gang that was intent on killing Paul was outmaneuvered by the Romans, and thus Paul remained in Caesarea for two years as a prisoner of the Roman Governors Felix and Festus, until finally he was able to appeal his case to the Emperor.

There is much practical wisdom that can be gleaned from even an abridged review of

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Paul's experiences. Allow me to highlight just five principles applicable to global engagement strategy.

1. Seizing Opportunities, and Obstacles

Paul is ambassadorial in outlook. He makes use of every advantage—and disadvantage—to be close enough to people so that he can communicate the message with which he is entrusted as an Ambassador of Jesus Christ. The very existence of the Pax Romana, for instance, is something Paul employs toward Godly ends, even though the empire itself was in so many ways an abomination. If Paul had lived in the era following Alexander the Great, 300 BC-100 BC, he could not have traveled so widely because of the territorial divisions of rival powers that had emerged. In fact, it would be harder to travel Paul's itinerary *today* than it was in the first century. He makes use of the road system and political unity of the tyranny of Roman rule.

Paul made the best of his disadvantages, too. His imprisonments, for example, became a vital part of his influence. As a prisoner he had the opportunity to share his faith with Festus and one of the grandsons of Herod the Great. It was because of his imprisonment that he encouraged many slaves to trust in Jesus Christ—and a centurion, too (Acts 27). He had access to the Praetorian Guard soldiers because of his imprisonment in the city of Rome. His beloved Philippian Church began in a jail with the conversion of a Roman guard (Acts 16), and his various imprisonments also gave him time to write books.

2. Timing, and a Deft Touch

Notice should also be taken of the careful use to which Paul put his Roman citizenship and his language skills. In Jerusalem, the well-timed mention of his citizenship rescued him from at least one beating.

And Paul's linguistic agility turned out to be eminently practical. Most public speech during the Roman era, even in Jerusalem, was in Greek; Paul was able to quiet the crowd when he spoke to them in Hebrew.

3. The Importance of Being Paul

Paul knew the importance of autobiographical presence. He told his own story whenever he had the chance. The Book of Acts cites in three different places Paul's personal Road to Damascus encounter with Jesus Christ. I know from my own experiences that people want to know where I am coming from, especially if they are deciding whether or not to hear me out in some advocacy to which I am committed.

Paul was autobiographical in every book he wrote; he did not hide himself behind theoretical discourse. To the contrary, we see the man himself, and the result is that his ambassadorship has more clout.

4. With a Little Help From Friends

Paul's friends played a key part in keeping the man mellow, and, as we have seen, getting him out of trouble. Indeed, Paul was a man of the church from the very beginning in Damascus where the Christians nourished him and baptized him. His friends at Ephesus, for example, held Paul back from a foolish misstep he was about to take into the great 27,000-seat Greek arena where a crowd was hysterical. It was no place for Paul to try to speak; his friends knew it and he listened to them. His friends protected him from the danger of himself.

With church support Paul decidedly avoided the temptation of self-referential fanaticism. He never saw himself as innocent and all others therefore guilty. He knew his own ambiguity, and through his brothers and sisters he became a man not only of faith, but also of grace. The people in his life kept the Apostle human and humane.

5. Ambassadorial Confidence

Paul was confident, and patient, under pressure. In fact, the best mark of all for the Apostle was his confidence in the goodness and faithfulness of the Gospel and the source of that good news, Jesus Christ himself. This centeredness enabled Paul to major in the majors and minor in the minors—a fundamental requirement of an ambassador.

He was quick to recognize what was at stake, and what was most important, according

the context of his situation. Contextual agility and spiritual balance—it's a combination that empowered him to make the best of circumstances without sacrificing his integrity.

Paul's ability to embody these five principles as he lived out his calling made him relevant even in the most challenging of environments. Remember that his most intellectually powerful statement of the Gospel came at Athens. He was standing on the Rock where the city regularly carried on intellectual argument and debate. The Areopagus is located just at the base of the world's most beautiful building, the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis. Standing there, exposed to all the philosophical winds of his era, he dared to point toward the stairway past the Winged Victory of Samothrace and to say on Mars hill, "The God who makes all things does not dwell in shrines made by man."

I have often wondered, "What is it that made St. Paul so relevant in his century?" Here we can see why—it is the sheer vastness of his message. What Paul said that day resonated with this Greek intellectual crowd because they were fatigued by the clutter of Greek/Roman mystery-cult religion and the manipulating games of mythology. Though the earthiness of the Gospel of Christ bothered their spiritual sensitivities, they were nevertheless profoundly challenged by the goodness of the Gospel of God, and the liberating possibility that God is able to speak for himself—and best of all, that he has spoken in his son.

Because of his spiritual centeredness and strategic savvy, Paul is at home even in a windy city, on a windy corner, where ideas, fears, and hopes swirl and compete. ❖