

# Uncovering Paul's missional strategy for declining Reformed Churches in South African cities



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This article explores Paul's missional strategy as a means of addressing the decline of the Reformed Churches in South African cities. Since 1994, there has been a scholarly outcry regarding the inward focus, decline and demise of established Church denominations – particularly within South African cities. Over 100 Reformed local congregations have merged, with some continuing to experience decline and even death within the Reformed Church in South Africa (RCSA) as in other mainline protestant churches like the Presbyterians, Congregational, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, et cetera. Scholars have identified an identity crisis and a lack of spiritual zeal in engaging with God's mission in the world, especially in the multicultural context of South African cities. This raises the question: What strategies are necessary to revitalise the urban gospel witness revealed in the Bible? From the *missio Dei* perspective, this article evaluates Paul's missional strategy based on Acts 17, using 10 'C' acronyms: Christ-centred commission, City-centred compass, Courage-capacitated conviction, Companionship-cooperative contacts, Core-content communication, Convinced Christian converts, Cell-group and household churches, Conflict-causing critics, Context-concentrated challenge, and Comprehensive concluding charisma. The article concludes with a reflection on these insights.

**Contribution:** This article contributes by uncovering the city as a platform and opportunity granted by God to individual Christians and the church collectively, enabling them to apply their God-given biblical and missional strategies. These are essential not only for an introspective witness addressing historical amnesia and the loss of missional identity but also for an intensive and extensive witness to the polarised communities of South Africa and beyond.

**Keywords:** biblical precepts; missional identity; missional strategy; polarised context; urban gospel witness.

## Introduction

Since 1994, scholarly concern about the inward focus, decline, and demise of established church denominations has also been felt and debated within the Synod of the Reformed Church in South Africa (RCSA). More than 100 Reformed local congregations have merged – some of which are in the process of decline or dying (Almanak, GKSA 2012:2831; Synod GKSA 2012:209 ff., 2018:1 ff.). Scholars have raised issues including an identity crisis and a lack of spiritual zeal in participating in God's mission in the world, particularly within the multicultural context of South African cities. These concerns challenge not only the individual Christians and the church collectively with the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ but also their condition (sense) of belief, belonging, and behaviour. This applies to both the personal (private) and corporate (public) life of witness through words and deeds in the polarised context of South Africa and beyond.

In this regard, the following question arises: What strategies are necessary to revitalise the urban gospel witness revealed in the Bible, with specific reference to Acts 17? This article explores the missional strategies employed by Paul in the four Roman provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia – regions in which there were no churches before AD 47, but which, by AD 57, had established and growing local churches. As Allen (2006) notes:

St. Paul could speak as if his work there was done and could plan extensive tours into the far West without anxiety lest the Churches which he founded might perish in his absence for want of guidance and support. (p. 3)

To achieve its aim and objectives, this article analyses Paul's missional strategy as revealed in Acts 17, using 10 acronyms built on the letter 'C' to clarify the essential elements: Christ-centred

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commission, City-centred compass, Courage-capacitated conviction, Companionship-cooperative contacts, Core-content communication, Convinced Christian converts, Cell-group and household churches, Conflict-causing critics, Context-concentrated challenge, and Comprehensive concluding charisma.

## Christ-centred *commission*

According to Glasser (2003:24), 'God's sovereign rule demands personal commitment. Those who would acknowledge God to be their God must personally commit themselves to Him and to His righteousness'.

Paul's mission strategy<sup>1</sup> was founded on (at least) three important bases. Firstly, it is commissioned by Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8; 5:19; 6:15; 7:53; 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7 ff.; 13:47; 23:9; 27:23). Secondly, it is motivated by God's covenant promises and prophecies made to the Israelites, which declared that the Gentiles would also share in God's salvation (blessings) (Gn 12:3; 22:18; 28:4, 14; Is 49:6; 55:4 ff.; 56:6 ff.; Zph 3:9 ff.; Zch 8:22 ff.; 14:9, 16 ff.; Ac 11:20, 26; 13:1–3; 26:16 ff.; Cranfield 2006:88 ff.). Thirdly, it is carried out as a sacrificial service aimed at delivering both Jews (Israelites) and Gentiles (non-Israelites) from the power of darkness (Satan) into the light (God) (Is 52:15b; Ac 9:15 ff.; 26:16 ff.; 20:24; Rm 15:15 ff., 21; Phlp 3:13 ff.; Bryan 2005:95 ff.; Walton 2008:74).

## City-centred *compass*

In Acts 17, Luke narrates the three strategic urban centres, namely in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens to and from which the Gospel spread. Paul deliberately chose influential metropolitan (cosmopolitan) centres of Roman administration, Greek civilisation, and Jewish religious and commercial life. These cities were located at the crossroads of major Roman roads or near prominent seaports where diverse people from across the known world converged (Roland 1965:23).

Luke's Acts and the Pauline letters attest to the success of this strategy in which the gospel was preached, established, and spread not only from capital cities such as from Thessalonica to the wider Macedonian province, from Corinth to Achaia, and from Ephesus to Asia (Ac 19:10; Rm 15:24, 28; 1 Th 1:8; Stott 1990:58) but also from military and administrative centres such as Antioch in Syria, Lystra, and Philippi. From there, the message extended to surrounding towns including Berea, Athens, Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia (Ac 17:9 ff.; 18:4 ff.; 19:8 ff.; 1 Cor 9:2; Phlp 1:12 ff.; Phlm 1 ff., 23 ff.; Col 2:1; 4:13 ff.; Rv 2:8; 2:12, 18; 3:1, 7; Allen 1977:13 ff.; Caudill 2000:218; Conn 1997:125 ff.; Greenway 1978:15; Schnabel 2004:1302; Verkuyll 1987:114).

<sup>1</sup>The word *strategy* is derived from a compound Greek terms 'στρατός' (*stratos*), meaning 'army' and 'ἄγος' (*agos*), meaning 'leader', from the verb 'ἄγω' (*ago*), 'to lead' – thus meaning 'to lead an army' or a plan of action or policy to lead an operation (cf. Cook 1963:25 ff.; Van Rheezen 1996:137 ff.).

## Courage-capacitated conviction

The capacity, commitment, conviction, and courage of both the individual Christian and the corporate church significantly affect church planting, church building, and the spreading of the Gospel. Throughout the book of Acts, a recurring pattern emerges: the missionaries were empowered with conviction (confidence) and courage by the Holy Spirit, who directed and moved them, thereby guaranteeing the fruits (victory) of their labour.

Paul was called and sent by the Holy Spirit (internal calling) through the church of Antioch (external calling) – a church to which he was accountable in his missionary endeavours. The church of Antioch relied on mutual prayer and support throughout the whole missionary enterprise (cf. Ac 13:1–2; 14:26–28; 15:35; 18:22–23).

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul's theology and missionary strategy (action plan) were formed and developed in praxis, that is, through the act of doing mission work, including the planting and building of churches. It was not merely a flexible *modus operandi* guided by the Holy Spirit, but one that was entirely subject to his direction and control (cf. Ac 13:2 ff.; Kane 1976:73).

This mission is unstoppable, for Christ's ultimate victory has already been assured and hence Paul was deeply convinced and highly motivated to boldly and continually preach and defend the gospel both personally and publicly, despite persecution, physical suffering, imprisonment, trials and martyrdom for the name of Christ in all his missionary journeys (cf. Ac 9:13 ff.; Rm 9:1 ff., 33; 1 Cor 4:2; Gl 1:15 ff.; 1 Pt 2:6–8).

## Companionship-cooperative contacts

The individual Christian and the corporate church's contacts, that is, the kinds, targets and extents of companionship, cooperation and contact, continue to affect church planting, building and spreading. Paul's missionary journeys and efforts were not a one-man show but were characterised by their teamwork spirit and effort, companionship and cooperation. Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by John Mark, undertook the first journey, which began and ended in Antioch of Syria in AD 46–48 (Ac 11:20 ff.; 24 ff.; 12:39 ff.; 13:1–14:28; 15:39–40). Paul and Silas, accompanied by Timothy from Lystra and Luke from Troas, embarked on the second missionary journey, which also began and ended in Antioch of Syria in AD 49–52 (Ac 15:22–18:22).

Paul, Silas, Timothy, Erastus, Gaius, Aristarchus and many other active collaborators were also part of the third missionary journey (Ac 18:23–21:16; 19:22, 29; 20:4). These team collaborators, which included the church elders and deacons chosen in the planted churches, were not only selected for their gifts and dedication according to the terms and conditions outlined in the Pastoral or Leadership letters (1 Tm 3:1–13; Tt 1:5–9; Schnabel 2004:1445 ff.) but were also

instrumental in the planting, building and expansion (reproduction) of churches locally and globally taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to distant places and to the ends of the earth (Hedlund 1991:241).

With such a commission, compass and conviction in mind, Schaeffer (1982) argued that:

If I had only one hour to share the gospel with a person, I would spend the first forty-five minutes finding out what the person believed about God and the last fifteen minutes presenting Christ from that basis. (p. 424)

Hesselgrave (1978:121 ff.) concurred, saying: 'Understanding another person's world view (or belief system) is the starting point for communicating the gospel'. That was the secret behind their team efforts.

## Core-content communication

The question here is about communication: What was at the core of that communication? What was the content of the communication? To what extent did the content of the communication affect church planting, building, and spreading?

They communicated the core gospel message to their audiences in a way that was relevant and practical to diverse hearers, including the three groups mentioned in Acts 17: the Thessalonians (Ac 17:1–9), the Bereans (Ac 17:10–15) and the Athenians (Ac 17:16–17). Such communication allowed the power of the core gospel message (Rm 1:16; Heb 4:12 ff.) and the work of the Holy Spirit to apply God's revelation (truth) in persuading them not only to accept Jesus as Lord of every area of their lives bringing reconciliation and peace with God (vertically), with themselves (inwardly) and with each other (outwardly) (cf. Ac 17:3; Gilbert 2003:242 ff.) but also to repent [ἐπιστροφή] (in Greek: ἐπι-[on] around + στρέφω [turn], referring to a change in the direction of life) from evil (darkness) to God (his light in Christ) (Ac 3:19; 11:21; 26:20; 28:27; 1 Th 1:5–9; 1 Pt 2:25).

In the case of the Thessalonians – most of whom were of the aristocratic class and held preconceived ideas – the missionaries, over three Sabbath days, presented an open, public persuasion through reasoning, expounding, explaining, proving, propounding and proclaiming from the Scriptures that Jesus is the anointed One, who fulfil the Messiahship as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament (Hebrew) and Christ (Greek) our Lord (cf. Ac 13:16, 41 ff.; 14:1 ff., 19; 16:14; 17:2 ff.; 18:7 ff.; 20:20 ff.; 21:27; 23:12; Gl 1:6 ff.; Ps 16; 22; Is 53).

The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians (Ac 17:10–11). They readily received Paul's preaching with open minds and interest, and thus conducted a judicial-like investigation, daily seeking, searching, and examining the scriptural truth by looking for evidence by themselves. They immersed themselves in the Old Testament to be exposed to its content, and the content was in turn revealed to them.

Paul did not need to stand there and persuade them; he simply taught the content, and it was effective (as Scripture speaks for and defends itself). This was sufficient to gather and establish a core group of believers in Berea.

## Convinced Christian converts

The question here concerns the response: Who responded positively and who responded negatively? Who were the opponents who stubbornly denied and rejected the message? To what extent did these responses affect church planting, building, and spreading?

In Acts 17:2, when they entered Thessalonica, the missionaries, as part of their missional custom, strategy, or action plan, consistently went first to the Jews or to those who were most likely to receive their message, and then to everyone else (Ac 13:5 ff.; 14:1; 17:4; 18:4, 19). Even in Berea, they went into the synagogue of the Jews and from there to the Gentiles, and several prominent women and men responded to the gospel (Ac 17:12; Castell 1998:227 ff.; Osiek & MacDonald 1995:211 ff.). Even in Athens, Paul also went first to the Jewish synagogue and then to the marketplace to preach Jesus Christ within the Gentile context (Ac 17:18 ff.). His urban mission movement deliberately targeted the convention of entire households or extended families not only to establish the long-awaited, converted, multi-cultural community of Jesus Christ but also aiming to build mission zeal within the church members themselves (Ac 16:15, 31 ff.; 17:5 ff.; 18:7 ff.; 1 Cor 1:15–16; Col 4:15; Phlp 2; Gl. 6:10; Eph 2:9).

## Cell-group and household churches

In the Greco-Roman culture, a household (*oikos*) was not only composed of the immediate family, servants, the servants' families, friends, and business associates (Arn & Arn 1982:37) but also of people linked by common kinship ties, tasks, and territory (Neighbors Jr. 1980:163). There were many household churches in Acts and in Paul's writings. These included, firstly, the jailer's household (cf. Ac 16:29–34) and Lydia's household, which became the Philippian church (Ac 16:15, 40); secondly, Jason's household in Thessalonica (cf. Ac 17:1 ff.); thirdly, the households of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor 16:19; 18:1–4) Titius Justus (18:7), Crispus and Stephanas (18:8) all in Corinth; fourthly, a household with an upper room in Troas (Ac 20:7 ff.); fifthly, Nympha's household in Laodicea (Col 4:15) and Archippus' household in Colossae (Phlm 1–2, 21–22); and sixthly, hospitality households in Rome (Rm 14–15:23; 16:3 ff.), particularly Phoebe's in Cenchræe (Rm 16:1 ff.) and Sergius Paulus' hospitality household in Paphos (Ac 13:6–12).

When Paul arrived in a city, households were his primary strategic focus. They provided socio-economic networks and structural vehicles for Christian mission, proclamation and the expansion of the early church in Acts. This led to the birth of embryonic house churches, and the church leaders capitalised and maximised on such a harvest (cf. Lk 10:2; Gehring 2004:302 ff.). Schnabel (2004) mentions:

Such a house became the base for missionary work. It also served as the foundational centre of a local church, the location of assembly for worship, the lodging place for the missionaries and envoys. Most importantly, they served as the primary and decisive place of Christian life and formation. (n.p.)

Stott (1990:312) observed (see Branick 1989):

People will come to a home to listen to an informal talk and engage in free discussion, who would never darken the door of a church, and there is an important place for apologetic and/or explanatory Christian lectures in the local college or university or in some other neutral, public place. (pp. 18–20)

## Conflicts-causing critics

The question here concerns the critics: Who were they? To what extent did they affect church planting, building, and spreading?

When Paul and Silas visited and preached the gospel in Thessalonica, it was not easy. Negative reactions, resistance, persecution and discouragement were inevitable (Ac 17:5 ff.). They expected it, faced it and were prepared for it. Some Jews were moved by envy and jealousy and could not tolerate Paul and Silas' teaching; thus, they opposed and persecuted them. They were joined by devout Greeks, prominent upper-class women and many idle people who loitered in the local marketplace. Together they stirred riots, turned the whole city into an uproar and dragged Jason, Paul and Silas' host, Jason, along with several followers of Jesus, before the local authorities (cf. Ac 17:7; 2 Th 2:11; Keener 1993:374 ff.; Rowe 2009:7).

They accused Paul and Silas (in their absence, as they had fled to Berea that night) of three things: firstly, of turning the world upside down; secondly, of acting against Caesar's decrees by claiming there is another king, Jesus; and thirdly, of disloyalty to the Roman Empire (cf. Punt 2015:89 ff.; Vaage 2006:254). To avoid an angry outburst, the city rulers acted wisely. They made Jason give a bond guaranteeing that Paul, Silas, and Timothy would not trouble them further, and then released them. As a result, the missionaries did not return (cf. Ac 17:9).

## Context-concentrated challenge

The question here concerns the challenges: What kind of challenges were faced?

Athens was a religious, cultural, philosophical, and intellectual city. It was regarded as the 'university of the world', a city of great minds, geniuses, orators, architects, artists and sculptors; yet it was a city without God, marked by a terrible and unimaginable emptiness (Johnson 1992:85 ff.; Witherington III 1998:513). It was home to philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Epicurus (founder of the Epicureans) and Zeno (founder of the Stoics), as well as others who were eager to hear any new ideas. They spent their time searching for, presenting, and listening to new concepts. It was such people who brought the apostle Paul before the court,

wanting to know what he was teaching. This court, the Areopagus (*Ares* meaning Mars, and *pagos* meaning hill – the hill of Mars) (Ac 17:22), was the supreme court of Athens, comprising at least 30 of the best judges of Athenian society. It still stands in the centre of Athens today. This was the very court that had tried and condemned Socrates centuries before. The Areopagus examined any new religious, cultural, civil, philosophical, or intellectual ideas and issues that might pose a threat of blasphemy, whether from locals or visiting teachers. It also handled civil and criminal matters.

Paul was presented with a remarkable opportunity. He stood before this elite, gathering the philosophers, leaders, judges and authorities of the city who asked him to declare what he believed. He seized every opportunity to present the gospel to the most influential people in Athens.

## Comprehensive concluding charisma

The question here concerns charisma: What kind of charisma did Paul demonstrate? To what extent was this charisma comprehensive, and how did it affect church planting, building and spreading?

Paul delivered a three-point, sermon-like gospel message before the Areopagus (Ac 17:19–31).

First point (Ac 17:19–23): To gain a hearing, Paul began by referring to something familiar to his audience. He spoke their language and called the Athenians 'religious', an ambiguous phrase that could either commend or criticise them for superstition (Ac 17:22). In the next verse, it became apparent that Paul was criticising their superstitions, for he pointed to an altar inscribed 'to an unknown God' and declared his intention to reveal who this God is (Ac 17:23; 25:19; 1 Th 4:5; Gl 4:8; Witherington III 1998:520 ff.).

Second point (Ac 17:24–29): Paul addressed three ideas: the Epicureans believed that matter was eternal (thereby denying the Creator and creation). The Stoics believed that God was identical with matter (pantheists). The Athenians, proud of their supposed self-made uniqueness, claimed to have sprung from the soil of their native Attica and hence they looked down on the uncultured, illiterate people as 'barbarians'.

Paul refuted these beliefs, declaring that matter is not eternal and that we are not God. Instead, God is both transcendent and immanent. He is transcendent because he exists outside (above) and beyond the created universe. He created, owns, and rules all things (Job 26:5; Ps 24:1; 33:6; 139:6; 145:18; 148:5; Is 40:12 ff., 40:22 ff.; 44:24; 45:8; 1 Ki 8:27; Zch 12:1; Rm 4:17). He gives birth (life), breath (sustain life) and all things (source of life) (Nm 16:22; 27:16; Job 12:10; 33:4; Ps 104; Is 45:12; Jr 23:24; 32:17; Dn 4:34; Rm 11:36). He determines creation's (nature and human) appointed times, seasons, geographical locations, history and destiny (Ps 31:15; Dt 32:8). At the same time, he is immanent, not far from any one of us, and therefore

accessible and knowable. There is no excuse for people not to seek and find him, for he has revealed himself in creation, history, human consciousness, and hearts, with the intention of saving us and being glorified (Ac 17:26; Rm 1:19 ff.; 2:14 ff.). In Acts 17:28, Paul dismantled their idolatrous system by virtue of the quotations from the two Greek quotes of the 7th-century BC Greek (Cretan) poet and prophet, Epimenides of Gnosus (600 BC) who said, 'For in Him we live, and move, and have our being' (though he was referring to Zeus). The Greek (Cicilian) poet, Aratus (315–240 BC), wrote in *Phaenomena* 5:1: 'For we are His offspring'. These poets, though they did not know the true God, bore witness to the universal (natural) revelation – they are living proof that revelation is inherent in all men (cf. Ac 17:22–34; Barnes 1975:261; Richardson 2007:22).

Third point (Ac 17:29–31): Paul concluded by proclaiming Jesus Christ, calling them to accept Jesus Christ and urge all people to repent. God had overlooked times of ignorance, rebellion, agnosticism, and idolatry, showing remarkable patience: 1650 years after creation before the flood (the entire world except Noah and his family drowned); then another 2500 years until this event in Athens, and even now, more than 2000 years later, he has not yet destroyed the world since the flood. Why? Acts 17: 31 indicates that, 'He [God] has fixed a day'. In Genesis God came to Noah 120 years in advance and stated that judgement was coming. One week before the flood, he told Noah to enter the ark, saying, 'In seven days the flood will come'. In the same way, God has set a day when he will judge the world by fire. Who is the judge? The one whom he has appointed and confirmed by raising from the dead – Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Judge. The resurrection proves that Jesus is both Saviour and Judge (Jn 5:22–27). He rose to save those who repent and embrace him as Saviour, and to judge those who reject him. God has appointed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness through the man, Jesus Christ, he has ordained and of which he has given assurance to all humans by raising him from the dead.

In Acts 17:32–34, three groups reacted when they heard about the power of Christ and his resurrection:

- **Contemptuous group:** they sneered, mocked and laughed at him, because according to the Epicureans, death is the end of everything (they rejected the idea of resurrection), while the Stoics spiritualised it, denying a physical resurrection.
- **Curious group:** they procrastinated, saying they would hear him again later (Ac 26:8, 24).
- **Converted group:** they believed (repented), belonged (were saved) and behaved (joined Paul and the missionary church). Among these converts were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris and other ordinary women without title or credentials.

The power of the gospel bridged every gap and level. This marked the beginning of a house church and the foundation of a faith community (Ac 17:34; Johnson 1992:318; Witherington III 1998:532).

## The critical implications and applications to the Reformed Church identity and witness

After discussing the biblical and missional strategies from Acts 17 using the 10 'C' acronyms, the following critical implications and applications to the Reformed Church's identity and witness are inevitable for church planting, building and spreading the gospel.

**Christ-centred commission:** What is the commission and whose is it? How effective is it? The synod from 1994 to 2000 found that the inward focus and decline in membership in the GKSA (1997:875, 2018:1) was linked to a lack of zeal regarding the nature and demand of gospel witness (Miller 1999:17).

**City-centred compass:** South Africa's main cities, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Durban, et cetera, are God-given platforms for church planting, building and gospel-spreading opportunities. These offer individual Christians and the corporate church the chance for intensive and extensive witness among the polarised people of South Africa and beyond.

**Courage-capacitated conviction:** Where did the missionaries' conviction and courage come from? Throughout Acts, a repeated pattern emerges: the missionaries were empowered with conviction (confidence) and courage by the Holy Spirit, who directed and moved them, guaranteeing the fruit (victory) of their labour. Paul was called and sent by the Holy Spirit (internal calling) through the church at Antioch (external calling) – the church to which he reported on his mission efforts.

**Companionship-cooperative contacts:** What kind of cooperation and contacts were needed? Paul's missionary journeys and efforts were not a one-man show but were characterised by teamwork spirit and effort, companionship attitude and cooperation strategy. In this regard, Vorster (2007) warns:

Institutionalism portrays a form of church-life where the elected leadership is the sole face and voice of the church [ ... ] Little activity on the level of the local church is noticeable - [ ... ] In this model clericalism tends to reduce the laity into a condition of passivity and to make their apostolate a mere appendage of the apostolate hierarchy. (p. 249)

**Core-content communication:** The gospel's core and content must be clearly communicated. In Paul's missional approach to the Thessalonians – most of whom were of the aristocratic class with preconceived ideas – he presented the gospel with open and public persuasion. This included reasoning, expounding, explaining, proving, propounding, and proclaiming from the Scriptures (cf. Ac 13:16, 41 ff.; 14:1 ff., 19; 16:14; 17:2 ff.; 18:7 ff.; 20:20 ff.; 21:27; 23:12; Gl 1:6 ff.; Ps 16; 22; Is 53). Addressing the church's identity crisis and lack of missional zeal, Bosch (1982) stated:

[ ... ] modern missionary enterprise was born and bred outside the church. The church – especially the Protestants [ ... ] concerned with what happened inside the church: on preaching, the Sacraments and discipline. The church was a place where something was being done (passive voice), and not a people who did something. (p. 17).

**Convinced Christian converts:** Who were the targeted converts? In Acts 17:2 ff., 12 ff., 18 ff., as part of their urban mission strategy, the missionaries consistently targeted the Jews in the synagogues first and then everyone else – even in the marketplace, preaching Jesus Christ in Gentile contexts (Ac 13:5 ff; 14:1; 17:4; 18:4, 19). They also aimed for the conversion of entire households or extended families (Ac 16:15, 31 ff.; 17:5 ff.; 18:7 ff.; 1 Cor 1:15–16; Col 4:15; Phlp 2; Gl 6:10; Eph 2:9).

**Cell-group and household churches:** When Paul arrived in a city, households were his primary strategic focus. These provided socio-economic networks and structural vehicles for Christian mission, proclamation and the early church's expansion, resulting in Acts and the birth of embryonic house churches. Church leaders capitalised and maximised on such opportunities. In the Greco-Roman culture, a household (*oikos*) was composed not only of immediate family, servants, their families, friends and business associates (Arn & Arn 1982:37) but also of people linked by kinship, tasks and territory (Neighbors Jr. 1980:163).

**Conflict-causing critics:** Who were the critics, and to what extent did they affect church planting, building and spreading? When Paul and Silas visited and preached the gospel, they inevitably encountered negative reactions, resistance, persecution, and discouragement (Ac 17:5 ff.). They expected it, faced it and were prepared for it. They were accused before the authorities of three things: firstly, of turning the world upside down; secondly, of acting against Caesar's decrees by claiming that there was another king, Jesus; and thirdly, of disloyalty to the Roman Empire (cf. Punt 2015:89 ff.; Vaage 2006:254).

**Context-concentrated challenge:** What challenges did they face? Athens was a religious, cultural, philosophical, and intellectual city. It was known as the 'university of the world', a city of great minds, geniuses, orators, architects, artists, sculptors. Yet, it was a city without God, marked by a terrible and unimaginable emptiness (Johnson 1992:85 ff; Witherington III 1998:513).

**Comprehensive concluding charisma:** To what extent was Paul's charisma comprehensive, and how did it affect church planting, building and spreading? Paul delivered a three point, sermon-like gospel message at the Areopagus (Ac 17:19–31):

- First point (Ac 17:19–23): To gain a hearing, Paul began with something familiar. He spoke their language, calling the Athenians 'religious', an ambiguous term that could commend or criticise their superstition (Ac 17:22). It became apparent in the next verse that he was critical of their superstitions, for he then referred to an altar

inscribed 'to an unknown God' and declared that it was his intention to tell them who this God is (Ac 17:23).

- Second point (Ac 17:24–29): Paul proclaimed that God is both transcendent and immanent. He is transcendent because he exists outside and beyond the created universe. He created, owns and rules, gives birth (life), breath (sustain life) and all things (source of life) and hence determining creation's (nature and human) times, seasons, places, history and destiny. He is also immanent, not far from anyone, and is therefore accessible and knowable. No one can excuse themselves from seeking him, for he has revealed himself in creation, history and human consciousness and hearts with an intention to save us and to be glorified (Ac 17:26; Rm 1:19 ff.; 2:14 ff.).
- Third point (Ac 17:29–31): Paul concluded by proclaiming Jesus Christ, calling all people to accept Jesus Christ and to repent.

In Acts 17:32–34, three groups reacted:

- Contemptuous group: they sneered, mocked and laughed at him.
- Curious group: they procrastinated, saying they would hear him again later.
- Converted group: they believed (repented), belonged (were saved) and behaved (joined Paul and the missionary church).

## Conclusion

This article has reviewed Paul's missional strategy as a tool to revive the decline of Reformed Churches in South African cities. There is an ongoing scholarly outcry over the ingrown, declining and dying state of established church denominations such as the Reformed, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, and Congregational churches, among others, in South African cities (in particular) since 1994. These estimations were confirmed and debated by the GKSA Synod of 2012, which reported that, in the 30 years of the post-apartheid period, more than 100 Reformed local congregations had merged, with some in the process of declining and dying (Almanak, GKSA 2012:2831; Synod GKSA 2012:209 ff.). Scholars have pointed to identity crises and a lack of spiritual zeal in participating in God's mission in the world, particularly within the multicultural context of South African cities.

This situation questions both the individual Christians' and corporate church's relationship with the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, as well as their condition (sense) of belief, belonging and behaviour in the individual (private) and corporate (public) life of witness through word and deed in the polarised context of South Africa and beyond.

In this regard, the following question arises: What strategies are necessary to inject urban gospel witness as uncovered in the Bible, focusing on Acts 17? From the *missio Dei* perspective, this article has reviewed Paul's missional strategy based on Acts 17 using the 10 'C' acronyms: Christ-centred commission, City-centred compass, Courage-capacitated conviction, Companionship-cooperative contacts, Core-content communication, Convinced Christian converts, Cell-group

and household churches, Conflicts-causing critics, Context-concentrated challenge, and Comprehensive concluding charisma, followed by concluding remarks.

This article adds value by uncovering Paul's missional strategy for urban gospel identity and witness. It addresses not only the historical amnesia and loss of mission identity and witness but also highlights the role God has given cities in shaping the biblical and missional (strategic) agenda of God's people. This agenda must be pursued through individual (private) and corporate (public) witness in the polarised context of South Africa and beyond.

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T.A.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its references.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's findings, and content.

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