

# A mission made to last: Paul as a sustainable leader according to the Book of Acts

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This essay examines how the Book of Acts portrays Paul as a sustainable leader. Paul not only preached the Gospel, but also gathered his converts into communities, trained and installed their leaders, visited these communities regularly, and co-operated with a large group of co-workers whom he would train to take over from him. He readily made himself available as an example for others to follow. Paul established churches in major urban centres, which would take the Gospel to their surrounding areas. In all of this, he not only followed some early Jewish practises but also emulated the example of Jesus, who likewise carefully prepared a group of people to continue his ministry after his departure. While Paul's circumstances and strategies cannot simply be copied in the different contexts, this presentation closes by describing what can be learnt from this portrayal for sustainable leadership in today's churches and other organisations.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article not only contributes to our understanding of the Book of Acts but also the way it characterises the ministry of Paul who dominates the second half of the Acts. In some instances, this portrayal challenges the understanding of Paul as he is seen in much of New Testament scholarship based solely on the letters of Paul. The research also contributes to practical theology / Christian leadership studies as it, based on the historical Paul, indicates some ingredients of sustainable leadership in Christian and in secular contexts. The research is also of relevance for secular leadership studies and social sciences.

**Keywords:** Paul (apostle); Acts of the Apostles (New Testament); sustainable leadership; Christian leadership; the Lukan Paul; Paul, the missionary.

## Introduction

Our title, 'A mission *made to last*', draws on one aspect of the current, much welcome and sorely needed debates on sustainability.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Call for Papers* for the conference, for which this paper was originally written, our quest is for 'what kind of leadership will prove to be sustainable in the long-term' (Call for Papers).<sup>2</sup> However, the long-term results of today's leadership theory and practise can only be seen in the future. Only then can they be analysed by drawing on all the empirical and analytical tools available today and, even more so, tomorrow. Because of the inevitable lack of knowledge about the long-term results of our current theorising and practical efforts, it is worthwhile to study instances of past leadership – near or distant – and to ask whether this leadership resembles what we today would define as a sustainable approach to leadership. We are looking for instances where the actual leadership challenges, the actions taken in response, and the results of that leadership are fairly well documented. In the context of this specifically *Christian* leadership conference, the New Testament is the obvious place to look for instances of such leadership. Jesus, Peter and Paul quickly come to mind. Here our focus is on Paul, in particular, on his portrayal in the Books of Acts, written by an author, who, although surely an admirer of Paul, also had his own perspective on this crucial figure of earliest Christianity.

In this way, this article seeks to contribute towards analysing the notion of sustainability 'from a human resources perspective, or politically, ecologically, and economically, but certainly also

1. For a survey and the history of the current emphasis on sustainability, see Caradonna (2014). Our focus is not on ecological issues, but on sustainability in the sense of *concern for long-term results*.

2. See <https://conference.hlt.no> (access 11 July 2022); see also the discussion in Avery and Bergsteiner (2011), Grint (2010), Hargreaves and Fink (2005), Henriksson and Weidman Grunewald (2020) and Hollmann (2013). For discussion of various definitions of sustainability, see Caradonna (2014:7–12). The identifiable and now widespread concept of sustainability is defined as 'maintaining human society over the long term'. Applied to our quest this would mean, maintaining Paul's mission and its long-term results. Paul's sustainable leadership sought to secure these ends. Caradonna's slogan 'A society that hopes to stick around long-term needs to plan wisely for the future' (p. 15) can also be applied: as Paul and his associates endeavoured to create something 'to stick around long term', that is, communities of Christ-believers in the Eastern Mediterranean world, able and willing to reproduce themselves, they had to plan and proceed wisely. Obviously, 'long-term', for Paul, was determined by his Christ-shaped eschatology and the expected imminent return of the glorified Messiah.

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spiritually and theologically' (Call for Papers) – and we might add from a historical perspective. With Paul, we examine one ancient precedent for 'leaders that are not obsessed with short-term results but focus on long-term sustainability and the common Good' (Call for Papers).

In doing so, we take up another important aspect of the 'Call for Papers'. We not only examine *what* Paul did to ensure that his mission would last and *how* he did so but also his *attitude and character* behind his endeavour as the conference aimed 'to search for what remains true for all ages and contexts, such as trustworthiness, justice, and concern for others – even if some re-interpretation or re-application is required' (Call for Papers). What picture of Paul's character traits emerges from his portrayal in the Book of Acts and how is this related to his sustainable mission, what his mission meant and was it made to last?

We focus here on the way in which Paul fulfilled his leadership role in his missionary and pastoral enterprise. Because of the constraints of our source, the Book of Acts, we only briefly address the other important question raised in the *Call for Papers*, that is, did Paul 'lead responsibly with regard to his own resources and avoid driving himself beyond what is reasonable or possible, resulting in frustration and burn-out?' (Call for Papers). The portrayal in Acts suggests that by and large Paul led responsibly with regard to his own resources. However, his letters paint a more nuanced picture of success, trials, frustrations, and failure.

A crucial insight in leadership studies and common leadership practise and experience is that leadership remains an abstract concept and empty claim without people who actually follow leaders.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in our focus on Paul as a sustainable leader, we must not only examine his own approach and behaviour but also keep the people in mind who followed him. Paul's own charge 'to follow me, as I follow Christ' (1 Cor 11:1, NIV) is also reflected in Acts: in Damascus, the place of his first ministry after his conversion/calling; followers of Paul are directly mentioned: 'his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket' (Ac 9:25). After Paul was stoned in Lystra, the disciples (not mentioned previously in the account) gather around his supposedly dead body (14:20).<sup>4</sup> Following Northouse's (2016:6) definition of leadership as a 'process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal', the people whom Paul influences/leads are a group of Christ-followers, that is, his many co-workers and the members of the local congregations he had founded. The common goal is the glory of Christ, the sanctification of people and their growth into Christ-likeness.

A few introductory observations on our source and quest have to suffice. This study concentrates on the literary

3. See the discussion of the changing understanding and definition of leadership in Grint (2010:1–15) and Northouse (2016:1–7).

4. See also Acts 13:43.

portrayal of certain aspects of the mission of Paul. We cannot discuss in detail the historical validity of this portrayal<sup>5</sup> or its contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history.<sup>6</sup> In this quest, scholars are faced with two factors:

Firstly, did what is portrayed in Acts actually happen (the question of *historicity*)? The ongoing debate of this aspect of Acts traditionally concerns two factors: does the portrayal of Acts agree with the picture and chronological aspects of this mission in Paul's letters? We return to this issue below. In addition, the supernatural aspects of Luke's narrative have been intensely discussed in much Western research of the last two centuries.<sup>7</sup> This discussion need not to concern us here as much of the evidence of a sustainable mission of Paul according to Acts is not related to supernatural events or influence<sup>8</sup> but rather 'mundane' measures, as we shall see.<sup>9</sup>

And secondly, to what extent is what is portrayed in Acts *representative* in content and volume of Paul's mission? In his selective account of Paul's missionary and pastoral endeavour (covering some 25 years between the conversion/calling of Paul and his arrest in Jerusalem; as a Roman prisoner in the last quarter of Acts, Paul lost control over the course of action),<sup>10</sup> the author of Acts focuses on the programmatic, exceptional moments rather than on the daily 'routine', which appears in passing and in a few summary statements. So, in a sense, we are asking a question that Luke does not explicitly address in his extended narrative apology for Paul's manner of including non-Jews into the people of God as non-Jews – in traditional terms, Paul's law-free mission. With this intention, the focus of the narrative is on Paul and his relations to Jews and non-Jews, *not* on the communities he had founded and the way in which he founded and nurtured them, on their character, structure and their sustainability. Constrained by our source, we therefore have to work with the glimpses that the narrative provides.

5. For a recent survey of the issues and the long and nuanced debate, see Keener (2012:90–220) and Frey, Rothschild and Schröter (eds. 2009). Schnabel (2004a:20–34) and Blomberg (2016:233–295) have provided able expositions and defences of the essential historical reliability of Acts. The approach taken in my study of the portrayal of trans-local links between early Christian communities in Acts should be helpful in this regard; see Stenschke (2011:433–453) and (2020a).

6. For a recent example of a reconstruction of the history of early Christianity, which is much indebted to Acts, see Hengel and Schwemer (2019). Both authors have high regard to the historical value of the portrayal in Acts; see also Hengel (2003).

7. For a survey see Keener (2012:320–382).

8. In our quest, supernatural events only play a role when they are adduced as *divine affirmation* of Paul's disputed mission or as an impressive component of the 'success' of his mission and ministry (see II.5.).

9. Paul also commends his converts 'to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified' (Ac 20:32). In Acts, Paul does not directly link the perseverance of believers to the Holy Spirit. For Paul, all human measures would be related to divine direction and empowerment.

10. Of these 25 years, Acts focuses on the years after Paul became associated with the mission venturing forth from Antioch in Syria (from Ac 11:25 onwards, 46/47–60/61 A.D.). While Acts notes that people continued to come and visit the imprisoned apostle (Ac 24:23; 28:30–31; some of it surely related to issues concerning the communities he had founded), it does not mention, for instance, the letters that Paul wrote while being imprisoned. On his way to Rome, Paul could visit his 'friends' in Sidon (27:3; a Christian community?). We do not know whether his ministry on the island of Malta led to the founding of a congregation (28:9–10). Apparently, the Roman Christ-followers were informed about Paul's impending arrival and came to meet him (28:15). In this way, Paul met the Christ-followers of Rome.

## Aspects of Paul as a sustainable leader according to the Book of Acts

The portrayal of Paul as a sustainable leader in Acts contains a number of facets that are closely linked with each other. This means that some overlap is inevitable, if we endeavour to gather all the evidence available in Acts.

### Founding, revisiting, strengthening, empowering and involving *communities* of Christ-followers

While the establishment of communities of Christ-followers and the continuous care for them was obvious for Paul the missionary<sup>11</sup> and had several theological reasons, this emphasis of his mission also ensured that it lasted – in his physical absence when he ministered elsewhere and once he had finished his course and the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus (Ac 20:24). This emphasis included the establishment of communities, revisiting and caring for them regularly and staying in touch with them.

#### Paul's focus on establishing communities of Christ-followers

Obviously, Paul did not minister in a highly individualistic Western context but in a collective culture. While some individuals among his converts stand out and are named, such as Lydia of Philippi (Ac 16:14–15) or Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris of Athens (17:34), it is noteworthy that Paul gathers his converts into communities. The organisational goal and procedure of his mission is not only the conversion of individual believers but the *establishment of communities of Christ-followers*. This is mentioned at a number of places and probably to be assumed for others:<sup>12</sup>

- At the end of Paul's stay in Damascus, Acts mentions a number of disciples of Paul who assisted in his escape from the city (9:25).
- Paul joins the community in Antioch and serves as a teacher in its midst (11:26).
- The account of the return journey from the first missionary journey indicates that communities were founded, which are re-visited in order to 'strengthen the souls of the disciples and to encourage them to continue in the faith ...' (14:22). Here we read in passing that communities of Christ-followers must also have been established in Lystra, Iconium and in Pisidian Antioch (14:21).
- Acts 15:41 mentions churches in other places in Syria and in Cilicia, which Paul probably founded before joining the mission emanating from Syrian Antioch.
- Paul and Silas travel through the cities of Phrygia/Galatia, visiting the churches (probably those founded during the first missionary journey) and delivering to

11. This was the pattern familiar to Paul through his Diaspora Jewish upbringing and experience in Tarsus and the pattern he had observed with Christ-followers both before and after his conversion/calling. Before establishing congregations of Christ-believers himself, Paul was part of the community in Damascus and Jerusalem and, later on, of Antioch.

12. Following his conversion/calling, Paul first joined the disciples in Damascus (Ac 9:19); later in Jerusalem (9:28).

them the decisions of the council in Jerusalem. In this way, the churches were strengthened (16:4–5).

- Lydia and her household, later joined by the jailor and his household, formed the nucleus of the church in Philippi (16:15, 31–34).
- Jews and Greeks join Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (17:4; see also v. 13).
- When leaving the synagogue in Ephesus, Paul takes the disciples with him (19:9) as he continues his daily ministry in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (see also 20:1).

As Paul, according to Acts, commonly started his ministry in the Jewish synagogues in the Diaspora, it is only to be expected that the people who accepted Paul's proclamation and followed him would *continue* to stay together and to meet regularly, just as they had done previously.

#### Paul's continuous care for communities of Christ-followers

Paul not only establishes communities of Christ-believers upon their conversion but also keeps *revisiting* the communities he had planted.

- At the end of the first Lukan missionary journey, despite the hostility and persecution which they met and endured in these cities, Paul and Barnabas 'return to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (Ac 14:22).
- The curious note in Acts 15:41, 'And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches', suggests that Paul and Silas also re-visit the churches Paul had founded prior to his association with the mission emanating from Antioch/Jerusalem from Acts 11:25 onwards. Presumably, Paul founded churches in other places in Syria and Cilicia after he left Jerusalem and was ushered off to Tarsus (9:30).
- Later Paul and Silas visit the communities that Paul founded during the first journey (16:1, 4).
- After some time in Antioch, Paul departs and goes from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, 'strengthening all the disciples' (18:23).
- On his way to Rome, Paul could visit his 'friends' in Sidon (27:3), presumably a Christian community that he may have founded before joining the Antiochene mission.

It is noteworthy that other than in sections summarising Paul's movements (such as Ac 15:41–16:5), Paul only rarely leaves a city and church on his own initiative when he could have stayed longer without being threatened himself or endangering his fellow believers (e.g. 18:18–21). In other instances, Paul appears to have stayed for longer periods, perhaps even as long as possible (20:1). Acts notes a number of longer stays of Paul in different places: 'for an entire year', Barnabas and Paul meet with the church in Antioch and teach 'a great many people' (11:26). Paul stays in Corinth 'a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them' (18:11). He ministers for 2 years in Ephesus, instructing the new believers (19:10).

### A generous dose of teaching and pastoral care

While the Lukan Paul is also a missionary to Jews (primarily) and to Gentiles, he is also, and perhaps even more so, a *teacher* and a *provider of paraklēsis*, that is, of exhortation and encouragement, of consolation and comfort.<sup>13</sup>

Paul preaches boldly in the name of the Lord in the Christian community in Jerusalem (Ac 9:28). For an entire year, Barnabas and Paul meet with the church in Syrian Antioch and teach a great many people. Probably as a consequence of this intensive ministry, 'the disciples were first called Christians' (11:26). Paul and Barnabas are counted among the prophets and *teachers* of the church in Antioch (13:1). Paul and Barnabas urge new believers 'to continue in the grace of God' (13:43). Returning to the congregations they had founded, they 'strengthen the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (14:22). On their return from Jerusalem, 'Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord with many other also' (15:35). Paul goes through Syria and Cilicia, 'strengthening the churches' (15:41). The decision of the Council is delivered to the newly founded communities (16:4). Paul stays in Corinth for a year and 6 months, 'teaching the word of God among them' (18:11). The third missionary journey begins with 'strengthening all the disciples' (18:23). Paul preaches/teaches daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for 2 years (19:9–10). Paul leaves Ephesus 'and after encouraging them' (20:1). In Macedonia, Paul gives much encouragement to the disciples (20:2). In Troas, Paul 'talked with them, ... and he prolonged his speech until midnight' (20:7) 'he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak' (20:11). Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders (20:18–35) is the only detailed example of the content of Paul's teaching, in this case, specifically to church leaders (for the content see below). Paul did not shrink from declaring to the Ephesians anything that was profitable and teaching them in public and from house to house (20:20). He did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears (20:31). Presumably, Paul also ministered to the Christ-believers who attended to his needs while being held in light custody in Caesarea (24:23). While in custody in Rome, Paul welcomed all who came to him, 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and the teachings about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (28:30–31).

In view of this portrayal, it is not surprising that Paul came to be remembered and venerated as the *doctor gentium*.<sup>14</sup> Paul not only founded churches but carefully instructed his converts, encouraged them and provided continuous pastoral care. They were thoroughly familiar with the content of the faith they had adopted and its implications in behaviour and conduct. In this way, they were able to continue Paul's mission when he headed elsewhere (20:25) or was no longer

13. See the survey in Stenschke (1999:335–344) and Falcetta (2020:53–59).

14. For instance, in the liturgy of the church in the invocation: '*Sancte Paule apostole, praedicator veritatis et doctor gentium, intercede pro nobis*'; <https://gregorien.info/chant/id/7270/0/de> (access 11 April 2022).

able to do so after his imprisonment. This certainly was a major factor that made his mission last.

### Establishing sustainable structures

Paul not only establishes communities and revisits them regularly but also sees to the structures necessary to ensure their ongoing existence. Paul and his companions select people who would be responsible for the community in their absence: 'And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed' (Ac 14:23).

On his last return journey to Jerusalem, Paul called the *elders* of Ephesus to him, presented his statement of account to them and gave them detailed instructions on how they were to continue his ministry of shepherding the people of God and to emulate his example. These men had observed his ministry for 3 years, now *they* were to follow it and take over (20:17–35). Now *they* were to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock (20:28). *They* were to be alert and to remember the example Paul had provided with his ministry (20:31, 33–35). *They* were to rely on God and the word of his grace, which is able to build them up and to give them the inheritance among all those who are sanctified (20:32).<sup>15</sup>

### Personal relationships

With at least some of his converts, Paul established deep emotional relationships. Paul admonished the believers/elders in Ephesus for 3 years, night or day, with tears (Ac 20:31). 'And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being most sorrowful ...' (20:37; see also 21:5–6).

### Empowerment

While this is not the focus of the narrative, there is some evidence that the communities thus strengthened and led are able and empowered to act on their own. The Christ-followers of Ephesus recommend Apollos to the believers in Achaia (Ac 18:27). Through the ministry of Paul's co-workers Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos is more accurately instructed in the way of God and thus able to assist with the proclamation of the Gospel in Achaia: 'he greatly helped those who through grace had believed ...' (18:27).

### Trans-local relationships

Although focusing almost exclusively on Paul, the second half of Acts indicates that Paul linked the churches he had founded with each other and with the existing congregations in Jerusalem, Judea, and Antioch. This is all the more discernible, when Paul and his co-workers, coming from congregations themselves and planting congregations, are seen as serving as representatives and emissaries of these congregations. Through them, trans-local relationships are established and maintained. Through Paul, the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Ac 15:41) are linked to the community in

15. See the detailed analysis in Stenschke (2020a).

Antioch (11:26) and later on in Jerusalem (11:27–30). Through Barnabas (a leading representative of the church in Jerusalem) and Paul, the newly established communities during the first missionary journey are linked with Antioch and with each other. The visit of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 provides a further link between Antioch and Jerusalem. Through Silas, a leading Christ-believer from Jerusalem, the churches in Jerusalem, Judea, Antioch, Syria and Cilicia and the communities founded during the first missionary journey and during the second missionary journey are linked with each other. This also applies to Paul. At the end of the second journey, Paul returns to Caesarea, Jerusalem and Antioch. Then Paul heads for the churches in the region of Galatia and Phrygia (18:18–23). At the end of the third missionary journey, Paul returns to Jerusalem with a group of men who represent different cities and regions (20:4). Through them, the mission fields of Paul are linked with Jerusalem/Judea and to each other. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul and his travel companions visit the Christ-followers in Tyre for 7 days. It is not clear whether he knew them previously, and if so, how (20:7–12). Through such visits, the different communities are informed about each other and – through the missionaries – linked with each other.<sup>16</sup>

When considering Paul's continuous care for the communities that he had founded, it is curious to note that the Book of Acts does not mention any of the letters of Paul.<sup>17</sup>

### Co-workers

In addition to establishing communities, caring for them and involving them in his mission, the sustainability of Paul's mission was much fostered by his co-operation with a number of women and men who are commonly called his 'co-workers'. Again, as the focus of Acts is on Paul, the references to his co-workers appear only in passing. From early on in his ministry, Paul gathers people around him who support him (Ac 9:25). In the early references in Acts, Paul appears (together with John Mark) as the co-worker of Barnabas (11:25–30; 13:2–7).<sup>18</sup> Later Paul seems to have followed the same pattern: He embarks on the second journey with Silas of Jerusalem (15:40 – did Silas come with Paul to the end of the journey? 18:22), to be later joined by Timothy from Lystra (16:1–3; 18:5). In Corinth, Paul teams up with Aquila and Priscilla, a Christian couple – more mission partners than close co-workers of Paul in Acts – who had come from Rome to Corinth (18:2–3). Later, they accompany Paul to Ephesus and stay there (18:19). While Paul apparently set out alone on the third journey, at the end of the journey and on his return to Jerusalem, he is joined by seven men (and the author, beginning of the second so-called 'we-passage') who represent various congregations and regions of his past ministry and who accompany him to Jerusalem. They are 'Sopater, the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, ... and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and

Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus' (20:4).

In one instance, Paul leaves behind co-workers when it is impossible for him to continue in a particular place. Silas and Timothy remain in Berea when Paul is taken to Athens (Ac 17:14). Later they join him in Corinth (18:5). So, following the model set by Barnabas with regard to Paul, Paul chose travelling companions, trained co-workers and entrusted the continuation and expansion of his mission to them.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the involvement of co-workers in the mission, Acts offers some hints that Paul also involved congregations in his mission enterprise.<sup>20</sup> While Acts does not indicate that the congregations were actively involved in spreading the gospel,<sup>21</sup> they and individual Christ-followers participated by providing hospitality and supporting Paul in other ways.

### Communication

The Lukan Paul generously reports about his mission in Antioch and Jerusalem. On their return from the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas 'gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles' (Ac 14:27). On their way to Jerusalem and as they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, Paul and Barnabas describe in detail the conversion of the non-Jews and bring great joy to all the brothers (15:3). In Jerusalem, they 'declare all that God had done with them' (15:4). At the end of the second missionary journey, Paul returns to Caesarea and most likely Jerusalem to greet the church (18:22). Arriving in Jerusalem at the end of the third missionary journey, Paul again 'related one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry' (21:19). Also in other encounters such reporting is likely to have occurred. To inform others about what 'God had done among the non-Jews through Paul's ministry' (21:19) not only emphasises divine approval of Paul's mission and affirmation of his way of including non-Jews into the people of God but also serves to link the Christ-believers to each other.

### Character

In our quest, character plays a twofold role:

*Firstly*, there is Paul's concern for *the character formation of his converts*. This concern can be seen in his intensive ministry of teaching and admonishing, which we have already noted. With regard to non-Jews, Paul's challenge lay in fully re-socialising former polytheists in Jewish-Christian monotheism and ethics. His letters amply attest that this was not an easy task and not without severe challenges, as the reflections of repeated clashes with a number of Christ-believers in Corinth in 1 and 2 Corinthians amply illustrate.

16. For a full survey of trans-local relationships between congregations in Acts, see Stenschke (2011:433–453).

17. For a sobering assessment of the significance of letters and letter writing for Paul's ministry, see Barclay (2018:289–301).

18. See Stenschke (2010a:503–525).

19. See Drews (2006); surveys in Ellis (1993:183–189) and Ohler (2013:243–256).

20. See the survey in Stenschke (2010b:68–90).

21. The picture is different in the letters of Paul addressed to such communities. The lack of evidence in Acts may simply be due to Luke's focus on Paul. Acts is also silent about many other aspects of the earliest Christian communal life.

According to Acts 14:22, the Christ-believers are to continue persistently in the faith and learn that this journey includes tribulations. Paul admonishes the Ephesian elders not to follow the leadership patterns of his day and age but to be faithful shepherds of the entire congregation and to refrain from gathering their own clientele according to the patterns of Greco-Roman client-patron relationships. They are to follow Paul's example and are not to covet anyone's material possessions. Rather, they must help the weak and remember the instructions of the Lord Jesus regarding material possessions (20:33–35; see Stenschke 2020a). In this way, faith/conviction and ethics agree. This will render the Christian ministry and witness of Paul's converts credible and attractive to outsiders.

Secondly, there are Paul's own character traits, which are either named directly (very few) or become apparent in narrative characterisation, that is, through the way Paul is portrayed in his ministry and by what he said.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Acts not only addresses a theological concern (see Lk 1:4) but also provides an *exemplum* for the readers to follow, which is one of the goals of ancient historiography.<sup>23</sup> This is not the place for a comprehensive study of Paul's character traits in the portrayal of Acts.<sup>24</sup> A few aspects, closely linked to each other, which are relevant for Paul's role as a sustainable leader have to suffice:

- Before his conversion/call, Paul appears in the narrative as a zealous persecutor of the Hellenistic Christ-believers in Jerusalem. He takes the initiative in carrying this persecution beyond the confines of Jerusalem to Damascus (Ac 9:1–2). Some of this *determination* and *zeal* also characterise his Christian ministry. After his conversion/calling, Paul is portrayed as *unwaveringly obedient* to the divine commission despite all the troubles and suffering, which this meant for him over the course of the years ('For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name', 9:16). In his defence before King Herod Agrippa II and Festus, he could claim: 'Therefore ... I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision ...' (26:19) and everyone knew about it.
- In addition, in his ministry, Paul was *persistent*. His perseverance in view of adversities, readiness to suffer and the sheer physical involvement (see Poplutz 2004:412–413), and performance in his ministry over many years will have impressed the people he led and was a crucial component in the sustainability of Paul's mission. Whatever other factors must be taken into account; they should not distract from the fact that Paul simply worked very hard.<sup>25</sup>

22. Also in this regard Acts follows the art of narrative of the Hebrew Bible where people are not characterised by extensive descriptions but through what they say and how they act; for an example, see Dekker (2016:311–324). We focus on the character *traits* of Paul, not on Paul as a literary character/figure in the narrative in the sense in which the term character is often used in literary criticism. Horrell (2020:272–273) also refers to the missionary zeal and the charisma of Paul according to his letters.

23. See the discussion in Keener (2012:153–155).

24. While there are a number of studies of the personality of Paul (see, for instance, eds. Becker & Pilhofer 2005), his characterisation in Acts has received far less attention.

25. For Paul's travel statistics, see Schnabel (2008:121–122).

- Although Paul was a pioneer in many ways, an important ingredient of his portrayal in Acts consists of intensive pastoral care and teaching, Paul comes back to the congregations he had founded and looks after them. He is concerned and *faithful*. Paul is both, loyal to Israel's Christ and loyal to the people he had led to faith in him.
- Paul's ministry included – at least in some cases – a high degree of *emotional involvement*. He reminds the Ephesian elders of his tears (Ac 20:19). Haacker (2019:339–340) notes that, in the ancient world, the suppression of tears was 'not a goal in bringing up young men ... assertions about one's own tears emphasise the intensity of loving attention or a feeling of closeness'. Paul's ministry was not one of professional distance from his 'clients' or one of successfully 'managing' his mission and team of co-workers, but one of high personal and emotional involvement: he was in tears for the Ephesians and with them. Later in the Miletus speech, Paul again recalls his emotional involvement, 'for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one of you with tears' (20:31). These claims again underline Paul's full commitment to the task. In his role as a leader in Ephesus, he served the Lord, was ready to relinquish status and to control his power and engaged emotionally with his followers.<sup>26</sup>
- The Paul of Acts is a *brave* man. In Lystra, he returns to the city after having been stoned there (Ac 14:20), only to leave a day later. In Philippi, Paul eventually exorcises a demon and is ready to face the consequences (16:16–18); later he insists that the city's magistrates apologise in person and rehabilitate him (16:37–39). In Ephesus, he is ready to address the incited crowds in the theatre but is strongly advised not to do so (19:30–31). Despite warnings about his fate in Jerusalem, Paul boldly continues to travel there (20:4, 11–14).
- Despite his calling and commissioning by the risen Lord, the exceptional signs and wonders performed by him and his successes elsewhere and in Ephesus (19:11–12), Paul claims to have served in *humility* (20:19), not with the arrogance of some leaders in his world. Humility means relinquishing status, 'but even this could be honourable for a leader' (Keener 2014:3007).

If not a word coined by early Christians, the Greek word *ταπεινοφροσύνη* was at least a word, which was (Walton 2000:76): '[G]iven an entirely different "atmosphere" by its use by the earliest Christians, where it is contrasted (e.g. in Phlp 2:3) with *ἐπιθειά* [seeking followers by means of gifts – hence ambition, rivalry] and *κενοδοξία* [vanity, conceit, excessive ambition]'. Paul's emphasis on his humility is striking in a social context in which honour was a prevalent value. However, Keener (2014:3008) notes that although '[H]umility was sometimes associated with servility, it could also be viewed positively (especially as gentleness), and the motif of a "humble" leader was widely valued. ... a ruler's "humility" was often considered power under control'.<sup>27</sup>

26. Adapted from Stenschke (2020a:3–4).

27. Adapted from Stenschke (2020a:3–4).

- The Christ-followers in Antioch entrusted their famine-relief funds for Jerusalem to Barnabas and Paul. Both men must have been *trustworthy and transparent in their dealing with financial resources* (Ac 11:30). Rather than seeking material gain (as other characters of the narrative readily do, see Stenschke 2021:225–241), Paul worked with his own hands for his own necessities and of those who were with him (20:34). The Ephesian elders could attest to this and other aspects of his ministry there: ‘*You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia ...*’ (20:18–21). Paul’s integrity in financial matters and other aspects of his ministry were discernible for others. In this way, Paul set an example of what he demanded of others, for instance of the elders. This made Paul’s ministry and leadership highly authentic.
- In Acts, Paul looks back on his past ministry (in his statement of account, Ac 20:18–27) but also *looks into the future* (and not only his own future, see 20:22–23) when he warns the Ephesian elders against intruders and other impending dangers ahead (20:29–30).
- Paul readily accepts the appointment of the church in Antioch to deliver the famine relief funds to Jerusalem (11:30). Later, he readily goes to Jerusalem to seek guidance and a solution to the conflict in Antioch (15:2). Paul faithfully delivers the decrees of the Council in Jerusalem to the churches he had founded previously (16:4). Paul is ready to take advice from fellow Christ-followers and high officials in Ephesus (19:30–31). However, despite the charge by the believers in Tyre not to go to Jerusalem, Paul continues with his journey (21:4). Despite being urged by the Christ-followers of Caesarea and his travel companions (21:12), Paul nevertheless continues his journey to Jerusalem (21:13–14). Once in Jerusalem, Paul accepts the counsel of the leadership there and is ready to demonstrate his own loyalty to the Law (21:23–26). Thus, with curious exceptions, Paul is characterised as *willing to listen and to act accordingly* and to submit to others. The co-operation with these and other Christ-followers, including his co-workers, implies that Paul is able to work in teams.
- During his missionary ministry to Jews and non-Jews and in the years as a Roman prisoner, Paul acted with great concern, respect and circumspect for his fellow Jews in the diaspora. He was not the one to start and to escalate conflict. The Lukan Paul is presented as fully loyal to his ancestral religion. In the way, he conducts his mission Paul respects the salvation-historical priority of Israel and – in his encounters with non-Jews without prior acquaintance with diaspora Judaism – is portrayed as a champion of Jewish monotheism.<sup>28</sup> Following his conversion/calling, Paul visits Jerusalem five times. In the ancient world, such loyalty to the ancestral religion was a virtue respected by Jews and non-Jews, as Paul claims before Felix: ‘I worship the God of our fathers,

28.I study these aspects of the Lukan portrayal of Paul in my forthcoming essay ‘Emissary to Jews in the diaspora and to some non-Jews, champion of Jewish monotheism and circumspect of diaspora Judaism: Paul of Tarsus in the Book of Acts’; Stenschke (2023).

believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets’ (24:14).

- Paul the prisoner embodies the ancient ideals of the *vir bonus et honestus*. Paul insists on his rights and proper legal procedure (the witnesses of his alleged crime have to level the accusation themselves) and readily points out that the case levelled against him is flawed. Paul knows of his rights as a Roman citizen and knows how to make use of these rights wisely (Ac 16:37–40; 22:25–29; 23:27; 25:10–12). He ably defends himself and does not counter-attack his accusers.
- In his prolonged imprisonment, Paul is as much a faithful witness of Jesus, the Christ, as in his public ministry.<sup>29</sup> He bravely confronts Roman governor Felix with his shortcomings when Paul not only speaks about faith in Christ Jesus but also about ‘righteousness, self-control and the coming judgement’ (Ac 24:25). During the sea voyage to Rome, Paul, the prisoner, assumes a low-key leadership role by giving advice and providing encouragement to all his travel companions (27:10, 21–26). Immediately after the shipwreck, Paul is ready to help and to heal (28:1–10). During the voyage, Paul gains the trust of the Roman officer supervising this transport.

## Competence

One further factor of why Paul’s mission lasted was his *competence* in what he did, visible in his command and use of the Scriptures, his ability to contextualise his proclamation in different settings, be it in diaspora synagogues or before the Areopagus Council of Athens, in his organisational and pastoral approach and his evident ability to ‘work wonders’. Horrell (2020:272) notes with reference to Wendt (2016):

With his expertise in Jewish tradition and Scripture, his labours and sufferings as an ‘apostle’ of Christ, his powerful deeds and ‘wise’ teachings, Heidi Wendt has suggested that Paul might well be seen in the category of ‘freelance religious expert’, like other such independent figures in the ancient world. ... Paul’s impressive ‘expertise’ may have well formed part of the attraction of his message.<sup>30</sup>

## Paul’s success and the divine affirmation of his ministry

Last but not least, Paul’s leadership was sustainable because, in many ways, he was ‘a success’, despite the tears which his ministry also involved (see above). With regard to Paul’s letters, Horrell (2020) notes, rather cautiously, that:

29. See Stenschke (2020b:391–406).

30. Horrell (2020) rightly refers in this context to the co-workers of Paul and reminds us that ‘we need to remember that he operated as part of a team of collaborators, named as such in the activities of both mission and letter-writing (e.g. 1 Th 1:1; 2 Cor 1:19). Even if Paul seems to have been the leading figure in his circle, he nonetheless undertook his activities as part of a group, such that any success of the message cannot be too heavily attributed to Paul’s personal charisma or expertise alone’. In addition, Horrell notes: Indeed, Paul seems to indicate that his presence and speech were sometimes regarded as rather unimpressive, at least compared with his weighty letters (2 Cor 10:10; cf. 1 Cor 2:1–5). While such self-deprecation must be seen in context as part of a highly rhetorical appeal in which Paul threatens to be as powerful when he comes as he is by letter, it may nonetheless caution us against placing too much emphasis on Paul’s own charisma as a basis for his success. (p. 272)

Paul was presumably successful, in some measure at least, in persuading people of the truth of his message, and that probably indicates some degree both of articulacy (as his letters well attest) and personal charisma. (p. 272)

According to the portrayal of Acts, Paul's mission was *certainly* successful. Yes, in some places, he and his co-workers were persecuted and had to leave prematurely (or decided to leave in order to de-escalate emerging conflicts and not to endanger diaspora Jews) and in some places – on first sight – the number of converts was not impressive, such as in Athens. However, in several places, many Jews and non-Jews came to faith (e.g. Ac 13:43; 17:4, 12; 18:8) and congregations were established, which proved to last.<sup>31</sup> Paul prepared and appointed people to take on responsibility at the local level (the elders) and had people who followed him as co-workers for longer periods. At the end of his active missionary phase, Paul could return to Jerusalem with representatives of the congregations he and his co-workers had founded in different cities and regions of the Eastern Mediterranean world (20:4).

Even Paul's alleged 'lack of success' in Athens deserves reconsideration: of the thoroughly non-Jewish council responsible for public religion in the city, at least one socially high-ranking member came to faith (17:34: 'But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them') ... quite a success when seen from that perspective!<sup>32</sup>

Acts does not carefully identify and distinguish which factors contributed to Paul's success. It will have been a mixture of his readiness to work hard and persistence, his competence, his personal charisma, the spiritual gifts he received and the direct interventions and guidance by the Spirit. The latter takes us to the second point.

As Christ's faithful and obedient witness, Paul continually receives *divine affirmation*: this can be seen in the *miracles* of all sorts performed by him throughout the narrative,<sup>33</sup> in a number of *visionary experiences* that he receives (Ac 13:2; 16:9–10; 18:9; 23:11; 27:23–24) and in the instances of *supernatural*

31. Probably Acts only narrates a selection of what actually happened. For instance, while it notes in Acts 19:10 that 'all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord', it does not tell us about all the congregations likely founded during the longer stay in Ephesus. Schnabel (2004) notes: Paul began his missionary efforts in Ephesus in A.D. 52, and he wrote 1 Corinthians in the spring of A.D. 54: it appears that in the two or three years between A.D. 52 and 54 several churches were established in the province of Asia. Luke and Paul probably think of the churches in Laodikeia, Hierapolis and Colossae in the Lykos Valley on the upper Maeander River that were established by Epaphras (Col 1:3–8: 4:13), and perhaps of a Christian community in Miletus. It is impossible to confirm (or deny) whether the churches in Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia were also established during this period. (p. 1220)

32. In a recent article, Evans (2022:2022) has argued that the verb κολληθέντες in Acts 17:34 ('but some men *joined* him') should be taken to indicate 'that a Christian community was indeed gathered together in Athens at this time. Leaving other social groups to join Paul and the other new believers, the new group is fused together by their shared faith, forming a new faith community in this ancient city' (p. 188). The expression should be 'read as a shorthand description of the formation of a Christian community in Athens' (p. 205). Evans draws this conclusion from his study of the use of κολλᾶω by Luke, other New Testament authors, the LXX and Hellenistic-Roman sources. For Dionysius and Damaris, see Metzner (2008:431–436).

33. See Heininger (2005:271–291) for Paul as a miracle worker in Acts; also see the assessment of Horrell (2020:272).

*delivery* that Paul experiences (being raised after being stoned in Lystra, 14:20; being delivered from imprisonment in Philippi through an earthquake, 16:26; because of Paul's presence on the ship on his sea voyage to Rome all the people are spared in the shipwreck and reach land safely, 27:24, 44; survival of a deadly snake bite, 28:4–7).

In this way, Acts emphasises that Paul is indeed the emissary commissioned by Israel's Christ and that his disputed ministry among Jews and non-Jews carried the seal of divine approval. At least *some* people sensed that God was with Paul and gladly co-operated with him – despite the suffering and the opposition that he had to endure during his ministry and which might and also did become their lot.

## Summary and analysis

The aspects that we have gathered here suggest that it is not only feasible but also fruitful to look at Paul's leadership role in Acts from the perspective of the current sustainability discourse. Acts presents Paul and his ministry as a mission 'made to last' and, indeed, lasting. This can be seen in his concern to establish communities of Christ-believers, the continuous care he provides to them together with his co-workers, the generous amount of teaching and ceaseless pastoral care, in the establishment and maintenance of structures in these communities, in the personal relationship that Paul maintained with at least some of his converts and in the establishment of trans-local relations between these communities. In addition, Paul's efforts at a sustainable mission can be seen in his prolonged and close cooperation with co-workers (who in some ways multiplied his own efforts), in his communication and in his emphasis on the character formation of his converts. Furthermore, Acts indicates a number of personal character traits of Paul, which were essential for the sustainability of his mission. Last but not least, Paul received divine affirmation for his ministry and his mission was, also in human terms, successful.

What are we to make of this very positive picture? Is the presentation of Paul's mission in Acts wishful thinking, the well-intentioned (but no more) glorified memories of an ardent admirer of Paul? Was Paul really so 'effective' and successful? There are several ways to find answers to this question:

- Further study needs to compare the Lukan portrayal of the sustainable mission with the letters of Paul which, in some ways, paint a different picture.<sup>34</sup> There are indications that, at least at the moment when some of these letters were written, Paul's mission seemed endangered and threatened in different ways: there were false teachers (or Paul assumes them to be active in different places), people competing with Paul for the loyalty and support of the congregations, some, perhaps many, co-workers and former companions who apparently left Paul temporarily or possibly parted with him for good. In some sections of his late letters, Paul comes across as a lonely old man whose lifetime achievements seem threatened. Probably

34. For an example, see Koch (2013:391–411).

the two portrayals of Paul's mission, that of Luke and that emerging from the apostle's own letters supplement each other: Luke provides an overall assessment from a distance (embedded in his own apologetic purpose for writing Luke-Acts), while Paul's letters, written out of concern and in the heat of the moment, reflect the endangered nature and the challenges that this mission faced – despite all measures taken to ensure its sustainability. There are indications in Paul's letters that some of the crises that his mission faced at particular moments or more generally, say the conflict in Galatia, were eventually resolved.

- Further study needs to compare the Lukan portrayal of Paul's ministry to the portrayal of the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels (see Stenschke 2020c:98–117; in which aspects did Paul follow the model provided by Jesus?), to Jewish models (early Jewish/Rabbinic interaction between teachers and students, Rabbinic schools, the founding of Jewish communities in the different diaspora settings, establishing leadership and boundaries) and to the sustainability of at least some of the Hellenistic philosophical schools (see, e.g. Eckstein 2004).
- In addition, one might survey the evidence for a particular 'Pauline' Christianity in the age after Paul. What evidence is there in ancient Christian sources for the lasting effect of Paul's mission and theological contribution (see eds. Klumbies & Du Toit 2013:391–605)? Suffice it here to say that the area of his missionary endeavours came to be one of the centres of ancient Christianity.
- Further study would need to assess the historical plausibility of this literary portrayal, as we have noted in the introduction. Tied to his question is the almost *superhuman* portrayal of Paul. In Acts, Paul's *exemplum* is not relativised in any way.<sup>35</sup> The readers of Acts know of Paul's special commission by the risen Christ, his exemplary obedience and his endless efforts regardless of personal consequences. They know of God's grace in his life, the way in which he had been equipped and motivated by the goal set before him.

In view of this, for his ancient and modern followers, Paul's overwhelming example is not meant to discourage them by reducing them to inevitable failure in view of an ideal that seems unattainable. Paul's example is more nuanced: for them, he serves as an inspiring example of leadership, not as an exact role model to follow. This was and is impossible because of the uniqueness of Paul's call, the circumstances of his ministry and his unique equipping by the Lord who called him. In view of passages such John 13:15 and 1 Corinthians 4:16, it is noteworthy that in the Miletus speech, the elders are not directly called to imitate Paul, but to shepherd the flock of God and to be alert (Ac 20:28, 31). In this way, Luke is perhaps less emphatic about Paul's example than Paul himself might have been.<sup>36</sup>

35.The following considerations derive from my own concern regarding the present-day significance of Paul's – for rhetorical purposes and because of the constraints of the purpose of Acts – almost superhuman example of leadership. Paul himself might not have had any issues with his example as portrayed in Acts. His letters indicate that he presented himself as an example for others to emulate. Without further reflection, he confidently calls believers to imitate him ('I urge you, then, be imitators of me'), as he imitates Christ ('Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). 2 Corinthians indicates that not all Corinthian believers were ready to do so.

36.Adapted from Stenschke (2020a:9).

We also briefly return to an important aspect of sustainable leadership raised in the *Call for Papers*, that is, did Paul 'lead responsibly with regard to his own resources and avoid driving himself beyond what is reasonable or possible, resulting in frustration and burn-out?' (Call for Papers). The presentation of Paul in Acts only allows for an affirmative answer.<sup>37</sup> Obviously, divine strengthening and equipment played a role and this is the factor to which Paul would most likely have referred to for an answer.<sup>38</sup>

However, Acts also contains a number of clues to factors that – at least from *our* perspective and understanding of all that is commonly associated with the 'burn-out' syndrome and its prevention – might have contributed to Paul's endurance without frustration and such consequences, even though we run the risk of romanticising the harsh realities of his ministry: he shared his ministry with others, invested in close personal relationships with his converts and his co-workers (at times also other people), at least on occasions combined his spiritual work with manual labour, was financially and otherwise not directly dependent on others and thus kept his liberty, worked in different places and travelled on many occasions.<sup>39</sup> In the ancient world, travelling by foot would provide plenty physical exercise and certainly a good break, even if Paul would use the opportunities that travelling provided for sharing the Gospel (see Lk 24:13–15; Ac 8:29–31). Travelling by sea would mean waiting around for days in harbours for suitable connections and the right weather conditions. Such exigencies and sailing for days, and perhaps weeks, provided some opportunities to take life at a slower pace.

In all of this, Paul had an acute sense of what he was doing and why. Off course, we do not know how much longer Paul would have been able to keep up the pace of life and ministry he had before he was arrested in Jerusalem and his life decelerated considerably, even though this happened against his will.

## ... and leadership today?

There are a number of implications of this example of sustainable leadership in our day and age in communities, which cherish the canonical books, including the Acts of the Apostles, as inspiration and guidance and beyond such confines. No doubt, Paul was person specially prepared, gifted and called – a pioneer in many ways. Yet, some of the ways in which he ensured that his mission would last, would be sustainable, are still worth pondering today, even if we do so in a very different context (for instance, established

37.Paul's statement of account at the end of the third missionary journey indicates that his ministry included tears and trials (Ac 20:19) and 'not ceasing night or day to admonish every one with tears' (p. 31). In warning the elders of future intruders and temptations for themselves ('and from among your own selves will rise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them', p. 30), Paul indicates that his mission efforts are and will continue to be endangered and thus have to be preserved carefully.

38.The picture in the letters of Paul is more nuanced. Some of the conflicts in which he was involved in deeply affected him.

39.For the statistics of Paul's travelling as is clear from the available sources, see Schnabel (2008:122). 'Paul travelled ca. 25 000 kilometres ... as a missionary, about 14 000 kilometres ... by land'. Poplutz (2004:412–413) rightly emphasises the physical exhaustion involved in ancient travelling.

churches and established ways of doing things – some more helpful than others! – not the calling and charisma of Paul, in a secular postmodern context, at least in some parts of the world).

However, once these differences are kept in mind, there is much in the portrayal of Paul in Acts that can inspire today's leaders working in contexts similar to Paul's but also in other contexts. Let me start with the observation that Paul not only intended to establish a mission 'made to last' but took very concrete steps to achieve this goal. Sustainable leadership needs reflection and clear action; it is unlikely to just 'happen'. This is not the place to repeat all we have discovered previously with regard to Paul's mission 'made to last' but to reflect on a more abstract level on the portrayal of Paul as a sustainable leader. What can leaders in churches and in general glean from this study of a sustainable leader of the past?

Perhaps most striking and helpful is the emphasis on *community* in the portrayal of Acts: Paul planted and nurtured communities, kept in touch with them, invested in people and involved them, saw to helpful organisational structures to enhance his goal, was personally involved over longer periods, nudged, encouraged and admonished others, was visible, transparent and authentic and brought people in contact with each other. In addition, Paul worked closely with others and in this way trained them on the spot and communicated to others what he was doing and for what reason. Paul intensively communicated the nature, values and goals of his mission (intensive teaching). People knew what this mission was all about and could be involved and take on responsibility, both on a local and a trans-local level. In all of this, Paul not only led and taught others but provided a lucid example of what he hoped to achieve in and/or for others. The emphasis is on *character* rather than on leadership 'techniques'. His ministry was not one of self-service, enrichment of self-enhancement but one of obedience to Christ and of service to others. For Paul, all of this was an 'all-out', long-term project ... either until the return of Christ or Paul's own death. Without wavering, he did all to 'finish the course and the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus' (Ac 20:24). To Him Paul was responsible, Him he sought to please. This is Paul, the leader, whom many and very diverse people gladly followed.

Let me close with two challenges that emerge from the Lukan portrayal of Paul's sustainable mission for churches:

*Firstly*, traditional and established churches, many of them threatened in their very existence, for a variety of reasons, must urgently reflect how they and their leadership need to change to ensure that they will last indeed and their ministries prove to be sustainable. The current *synodal way of being the Church* – movement in the Roman-Catholic Church is an example of people addressing this challenge. Without some drastic changes, the fast demise of this Church (and others!) is likely to continue and even increase. The portrayal of Paul in Acts offers inspiration for change towards sustainability.

*Secondly*, some of the postmodern churches that have been founded in the past decades likewise need to reflect on ensuring that they will last. In some cases, the person and personality of the – often charismatic in several senses of the word – founding figure or figures still plays a crucial role. Paul's communities survived without him (and he made sure that they would!) – will some current churches, impressive as they might be – survive changes in the leadership? While some of these churches have seen impressive growth over a short period, this must not blind us to the fact that in some cases they have also 'lost' many people – for a variety of reasons and in this way proved to be far from sustainable. This needs to be analysed carefully and critically.

The emphasis in the Book of Acts on *character* is sadly lacking in many Christian contexts today. The *character formation* of believers through systematic teaching, encouragement and admonishing is often neglected. No church will prove to be sustainable without a decided emphasis on biblical discipleship and sanctification of all of its members. Another emphasis will have to be *character formation among church leaders*. The last few years have shown abundantly and sadly that the more or less serious character flaws and trespasses of some internationally well-known and much cherished Christian leaders can have devastating effects on the ministries they lead and other believers and surely damage the reputation of Christ's cause also beyond the confines of the church.

Many voices in today's secular leadership discussion emphasise the character necessary for leaders. For example, in his description of servant leadership, Northouse (2016:225–256) emphasises 10 character traits of servant leaders, namely the ability to listen, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community (2016:227–229). Maak and Ulrich (2007:388–389) list 14 virtues that are essential for leadership with integrity in business contexts. It is welcome that *character* also plays a major role in Christian leadership discussions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>For one example, see <https://k5-leitertraining.de/training/inhalte> (access 16 April 2022).

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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