

# Every People Group, Every Place: Gospel Proclamation and Disciples Making to the Ends of the Earth

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## Introduction

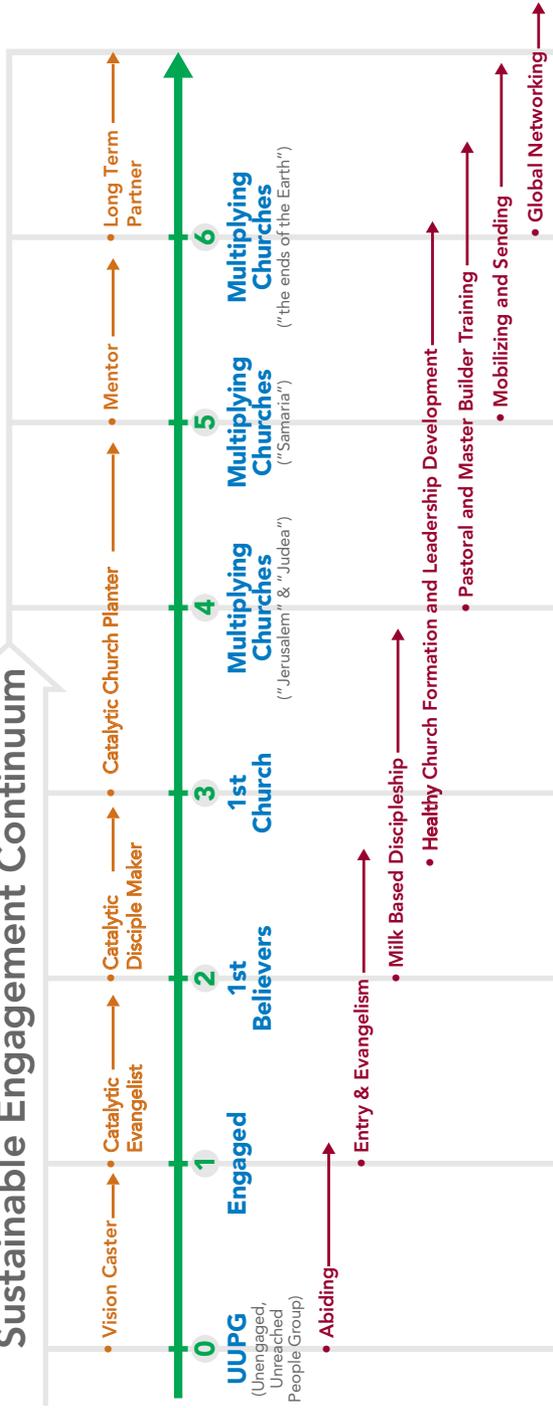
*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven<sup>1</sup>*

With two PhDs in missiology and forty years of church planting experience between us, we have spent countless hours thinking about and actively engaging in missions. We have been to many meetings where mission strategy was being discussed. Most meetings have included a bit of controversy. Does God want missionaries to spend more time praying or more time sharing the gospel? Should we focus our attention on evangelism or on disciple making? Should our strategy be “zero to one” or should we aim for training and multiplication?

For just a moment, imagine a parent who hears a baby cry. (Between us, we have eight children.) Does the baby need to be changed? To be fed? To be comforted? To be put to bed? Which is the right answer? The wise parent knows that the answer depends on the situation the baby is experiencing at that moment.

The thesis of this article is that the same is true in mission strategy. All of the false dichotomies in the first paragraph are just that—false. Each of the actions argued are correct—when used in the correct situation. The key is not to decide what the correct action is, but to know when it is the correct action.

# Sustainable Engagement Continuum



{ • Continuum • People Group Status • Cross Cultural Worker • Strategy }

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## The Six Phases Explained

The basic outline of this article is taken from the continuum chart (figure 1), which shows six phases of a healthy, multiplying church planting process aimed at impacting an entire people group or area. These phases are based on the process of moving from each of these seven stages to the next: Unengaged Unreached People Group (UUPG), Engaged, First Believer, First Church, Multiplying Churches in Jerusalem and Judea, Multiplying Churches in Samaria, and Multiplying Churches to the Ends of the Earth. The authors' contention is that at each stage of the continuum, the missionary<sup>2</sup> needs to accept a distinct role in order to focus on a particular element of strategy. Strategies differ from methods which should vary with each context.

### Phase 1: From Unengaged Unreached People Group to Engaged

Missiologists rather ambiguously define an unengaged, unreached people group (UUPG) as a people group where “there is no church planting strategy, consistent with evangelical faith and practice, under way.”<sup>3</sup> Missiological research shows that somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 UUPGs exist today.

Why don't missiologists know exactly how many groups are unengaged? First, missiological research is not an exact science. Differentiating one people group from the next and then locating each group on a map can be a challenging undertaking. When distinguishing between people groups, researchers are forced to make choices based on language, religion, geographical location, and culture

The second reason the number is not precisely known is because engaged people groups, due to some unforeseen circumstances, become unengaged again. For example, if a missionary or local church planter begins to implement a new strategy among a UUPG, then that people group becomes engaged. If the worker should die or be transferred to another area, the strategy often ceases and the people group is once again, by definition, unengaged.

Traditionally, the missiological demarcation between considering a people group reached or unreached is whether the population contains a minimum of two percent evangelicals. As missiologist Robin Hadaway has pointed out, the two percent threshold is arbitrary at best. It finds its roots not from Scripture, but from a field of scientific research that has not stood the test of time.<sup>4</sup> We think a better determination would be if believers from the people group are actively participating in a reproducing church planting strategy that radiates throughout the people group geographically and sociologically.

During this phase when there is no other engagement, the global church must provide information to individual Christians, asking them to intercede for workers to be called out (Luke 10:2). Therefore, research and prayer form the basic action steps.

## **Phase 2: From Engaged to First Believer**

In Phase 1, usually there are no known believers among a population segment who can be trained and equipped to multiply the evangelistic force. In lieu of an army of harvesters to multiply the work, the missionary must step into the primary engagement role. The missionary must enter new communities with the gospel with the intention of seeing people believe and become disciples of Christ. Sometimes this strategy is described as “zero to one,” meaning the role of the worker is to share the gospel until the people group has at least one believer.

As one considers what it means to engage a people group and how to get started with sharing the gospel, one must remember that progressing through the phases does not mean one stops actions that began in previous phases. As the missionary strategist begins to share the gospel, he must continue to pray, but the main emphasis moves to evangelism.

Some people assume before one can share the gospel, one needs to befriend a lost person and earn the right to preach the gospel both in word and deed. This action may be called “doing life” with others. On the mission field, many missionaries attempt the same style of evangelism during the zero to one process.

Unfortunately, it is not a foregone conclusion that the person with whom one first begins a relationship ever will become a Christian. In fact, some missionaries have spent countless time building relationships with people without seeing a positive response to the gospel. They often lament the hard soil to which they have been assigned. All of the time invested in one friendship was time not spent sharing the gospel with hundreds who may have been responsive if they had been given the chance to hear about Jesus.

Consequently, the worker should continually go out in an attitude of prayer while intentionally looking for people who are ready to hear and receive the gospel. Practitioners in India often say that they have 1.2 billion lost people with whom to share the gospel every day. They do not have time to share with all of them, so they want to know who is ready to receive the gospel each day.

How does one know who is interested? “Lead with Jesus” is the advice of many evangelists. Direct the conversation quickly to spiritual matters and then to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Workers need to know who is ready to talk about Jesus right now.

## **Phase 3: From First Believer to First Church**

Many events that are called mission efforts are really evangelistic outreaches. The goal is to see individuals won to Christ. This goal is good if it is a step in a process, but it should not be the final objective. God calls us not only to offer His salvation to people, but also to bring them into a faith community in which they can grow in their relationship with Him.

The purpose of Phase 3 is to walk through the processes involved in seeing people come to faith in Christ and then moving on to a strategy of evangelism that results in the establishment of churches. The link between those two steps—

evangelism and church formation—is disciple making. Discipleship comes in two stages: milk and meat<sup>6</sup>.

What do new believers need to know? When do they need to know it? What, if anything, are they supposed to do with what they know? These are the questions that come to mind when one talks about “milk-based” discipleship.

A variety of milk-based discipleship packages are in use around the world today.<sup>7</sup> The important criteria when deciding which one to implement is biblical soundness, simplicity, reproducibility, and the ability to lead new disciples to the next level in their walk with Christ. Another good thing to keep in mind is that none of the various packages must remain fixed in stone. A wise missionary knows how to adapt the package based on the cultural and religious relevance to the disciple’s background.

Very often, missionaries want to stop evangelism at this point so they can focus on discipleship. Rapid evangelism, however, is a biblical sign of deep discipleship which, in turn, is the natural consequence of biblical evangelism. What do true disciples do? Whatever Jesus tells them to do.<sup>8</sup> What is one of the priorities Jesus gave all of us? Go and make more disciples! Therefore, deep discipleship equals rapid evangelism. At this point, the role of the missionary shifts to being a trainer (aka. disciple maker)—leading the new disciples to live out and share their new-found faith, multiplying the harvest force from within the harvest field.

“Meat-based” discipleship continues throughout the life of the believer and the church. It is beyond the purview of this brief article to go into great detail, but more discipleship must take place beyond the initial set of lessons. Church members and their leaders need to learn to apply the whole counsel of God through a never-ending process of growing in Christ. To meet this need, many forms of mobile theological education have been developed to help develop disciples as well as church leaders.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Phase 4: From First Church to Multiplying Churches in Jerusalem and Judea**

One sign of a healthy church involves multiplication of disciples and churches. As disciples grow in their transformation process, they continue to share the gospel with the lost. As more lost people come to faith in Christ and are discipled, more churches will need to be planted to keep up with the growth rate. Starting more churches requires training more pastors.

According to Acts 1:8, Christ’s commission calls for the disciples to take the gospel to those living in close proximity to them—in Jerusalem and Judea. Jerusalem and Judea represent people and places where the disciples already have access, both culturally and geographically.

In the same way, a sustainable missionary engagement strategy for this phase must focus on reaching a people group and then equipping those people to reach the people where they live. Some missiologists refer to this idea as the *oikos* principle.

The basic concept is to utilize the sameness of your cultural context as well as your sphere of influence to multiply disciples and churches.<sup>10</sup>

### **Phase 5: From Multiplying Churches in Jerusalem and Judea To Multiplying Churches in Samaria**

Why Samaria? Why did Jesus delineate Samaria when commissioning his trusted followers? Weren't the Samaritans an insignificant, backward, and heretical bunch? Didn't the Jews hate the Samaritans? Yes. In fact, in Jesus' day Jews did not associate with Samaritans (John 4:9).

Christ's commission to engage the Samaritans was necessary and strategic for the missionary task because the Samaritans were also in need of salvation. It continues to be strategic because the engagement of people groups of other cultures is a key training field for engaging distant cultures—the ends of the earth.

As people come to faith, are discipled, and begin making disciples within their *oikos*, Christ them to love others (even people they dislike). They must love them enough to risk life and limb in order to take the gospel to them. Indeed, God chose Israel to be a light to all nations. Israel was to be a contrast community intended to bring the nations into relationship with the one true God. God has a similar commission for all people groups as they come into the Kingdom.

In this phase, the missionary should mentor church leaders and disciples to engage a nearby group with the gospel in an effort to participate with the Father in bringing the gospel to all peoples. This work would include biblical teaching about the mystery of the gospel<sup>11</sup> –that all peoples are one in Christ. Instruction also includes vision casting and training in cross-cultural evangelism and church planting.

### **Phase 6: From Multiplying Churches in Samaria to Multiplying Churches to the Ends of the Earth**

Phase six is characterized by intentional efforts to take the gospel, make disciples, and plant churches in culturally distant places with a focus on reaching the ends of the earth. With the establishment of churches in a near, yet cross-cultural, context, disciples gain a larger vision for people groups in places that are seemingly beyond their reach.

During this phase, people groups once considered mission fields begin sending out their own missionaries to new mission fields. One has only to think of the Nigerian, Chinese or Brazilian churches to see this type of Phase 6 progression in the sustainable engagement continuum. At this point, the missionary moves into the role of long-term partner, working together for the Kingdom and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

## **The Six Phases Experienced: The Apostle Paul and His Team**

As a case study for these stages, we will examine the work of the Apostle Paul and his ministry partners. Can the phases of the continuum process be found at work in their ministry and the expansion of the early church? Of course, we need to ask whether Paul's strategy was prescriptive or descriptive. Were the strategies of Paul and his team simply recorded in the Bible as a description of what happened, or were they recorded as guidance for missionaries developing strategies in each era and culture?

Generally, Acts is more descriptive, while the Epistles contain both descriptive and prescriptive passages. While it would be wrong to demand allegiance for any description of Pauline practice, it seems it would be equally foolish to ignore the missions' practices of one of the greatest missionaries who ever lived. Do Paul's practices match the stages defined above?

### **Phase 1: From Unengaged Unreached People Group to Engaged**

When Acts 13 opens, the leaders in the church of Antioch were in the midst of fasting and praying when the Spirit spoke. While they were in an abiding posture, the Spirit called Paul and Barnabas and sent them to Cyprus to preach the gospel to a new people in a new place.

When Paul and Barnabas entered new fields, they established a pattern of asking the Father to open doors and allow for a clear presentation of the gospel (Col. 4:3-4), which led to a rapid advance of the Good News (2 Thess. 3:1).

Two reactions are certain whenever the gospel is proclaimed among an unreached people—response and persecution. Paul and his team prayed for the growth of the new believers (Col. 1:9-12), for protection from evil (2 Thess. 3:2), and for God to work in the heart of the persecutor like He worked in Paul's heart.

In every aspect of this work, they urged Christians to pray continuously for God to be glorified through it (2 Thess. 1:12). The pattern Paul and his team established is one that begins in a spirit of abiding that leads to entering new fields in order to share the gospel, make disciples, multiply churches, and train leaders.

### **Phase 2: From Engaged to First Believer**

Evangelism began as soon as Paul and Barnabas arrived at Cyprus. They went into the synagogue and proclaimed the gospel to the Jews first. Soon they began sharing the throughout the island. They reached out for the help of John Mark,<sup>12</sup> so others could help with baptizing, disciple-making, and forming faith communities.

According to Acts 13:6-12, they soon went "through the whole island as far as Paphos." Does this mean that they were sharing everywhere they went, or were they focusing on the cities, hoping the people who lived there would take the gospel to the rest of the area? Luke obviously did not tell us every part of the itinerary. In Acts

15:39, Barnabas and John Mark returned to the work in Cyprus; so it seems there was some fruit.

What was the content of the message they were sharing with Jews and Gentiles as they went? Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:1—5).

Paul gave us his understanding of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (NIV).

Scripture reveals that the gospel is the power of salvation and Paul was never ashamed of it (Rom. 1:16). Furthermore, when Paul referred to receiving the gospel, he said he actually received it from Christ (Acts 9:4—19). Paul’s gospel was not watered down or handed down; it was precise and inerrant, being directly delivered to him from Christ. Missionaries should follow Paul’s example.

### **Phase 3: From First Believer to First Church**

Every movement starts with an individual and a household. As the gospel moved to Macedonia, a man appeared to Paul in a dream (Acts 16:9). This vision led Paul and his team to a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira (Acts 16:13, 14). Upon arrival, Paul’s goal was not simply to lead Lydia to Christ, but to plant a church in Philippi.

That day, on the banks of the river on the outskirts of Philippi, Lydia and her whole household believed and were baptized (Acts 16:15). Lydia subsequently invited Paul and his colleagues to stay at her home. While Paul was a guest at Lydia’s house, the core group of believers continued to increase, including the Philippian Jailer and his family (Acts 16:34). As persecution continued to mount against Paul and Silas, they made one last visit to Lydia’s house to encourage the believers (Acts 16:40).

What began in Philippi as a small gathering became a church (Acts 16). Twelve years after the formation of the first congregation, Paul addressed his letter to the Philippians: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:2). Furthermore, Paul described the Philippian church as an evangelistic church that maintained a “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:5). In other words, the Philippian Christians were actively sharing the gospel with lost people and the church continued to grow.

#### **Phase 4: First Church to Multiplying Churches in Jerusalem and Judea**

Going back to Acts 13, the first stop on the first missionary journey was Cyprus. It is not clear from the text whether Paul and Barnabas went to Cyprus because Barnabas and John Mark were from there, but one can safely assume that at least part of the reason they went to Cyprus was because their *oikos* was there. They were Cypriot Jews. As they returned to that island, they started their ministry by going to the synagogues. In this regard, Cyprus equated to their Jerusalem and Judea.

Acts 13:5-6 records that Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark landed in Salamis, “proclaiming the word of God to the Jews in the synagogues” and traveling “through the whole island until they came to Paphos.” From Cyprus they crossed over to the mainland and traveled around Southern Galatia, entering synagogues and proclaiming the word as “the word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (vs 49).

This strategic development was fulfillment of the thesis of the Book of Acts: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They were not reaching the literal Jerusalem and Judea, but they were reaching their home community and the people who were like them. They taught their disciples to multiply until the entire area had access to the gospel. Cyprus was no longer unreachable.

#### **Phase 5: Multiplying Churches in Jerusalem and Judea to Multiplying Churches in Samaria**

The obvious New Testament example of reaching Samaria might be Samaria itself. By the time Paul started his ministry, that line had already been crossed. For Paul, as a former Pharisee, the issue was reaching Gentiles. Remember that Samaria represented people who were despised by the Jews. The link for Paul to the Gentiles should be obvious.

Almost every time Paul was confronted for preaching the gospel by the Jews, they were willing to listen patiently to his defense until he came to the part about the good news being for the Gentiles as well. In fact, Paul himself was forced to defend his ministry to the leadership of the church in Jerusalem by certain people who

opposed grace being offered to Gentile converts (Acts 15:1-35). Later, in his letter to the Ephesians, he explained that the “mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6, ESV).

### **Phase 6: From Multiplying Churches in Samaria to Multiplying Churches to the Ends of the Earth**

At the end of the third missionary journey, Paul wrote a letter to the Romans. In Romans 15, he told the church in Rome that there is no place left for him. Therefore, he asked for their help to go to Spain. He continued to fix his gaze obediently on bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth.

From there, Paul returned to Miletus and gave a farewell speech to all the elders of the church in Ephesus. He was accompanied by several members of his apostolic team (Acts 20:4).<sup>13</sup> Not only was he exiting his field, but he also was training companions to exit their fields and look to the regions beyond. The example was a process of entry, evangelism, discipleship, church formation, and leadership development involving the local leaders and apostolic leaders before moving on to the next place together.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Mission Strategy Today**

We are not surprised to discover the basic outline of this continuum is supported by a review of the work of Paul and his team. In fact, we originally discovered the principles based on a study of Paul’s strategy. What did Paul do? What would his methods look like in our context? Can principles behind the methods be transferred from location to location?

Paul was equally concerned with the breadth of gospel saturation and the depth of discipleship in line with the gospel. We started this article by suggesting the false dichotomy of breadth versus depth was just that – a false dichotomy. Paul was intent on getting the gospel to the ends of the earth, but labored to ensure it was the whole gospel. He wanted sustainable churches to be planted in every location in order to continue the work of building upon the foundation which he preached—Jesus Christ.

As Paul’s church planting ministry in each location progressed, his role changed to meet the needs based on the phase of ministry. When Paul found himself in an actual zero-to-one scenario, he spent much of his time dialoguing with the Jews in the synagogues. He adopted this strategy not just because they needed the gospel, but also because the Jews represented a culture group that could be disciplined and trained to share the gospel, disciple others and plant churches.

Paul was mobilizing and recruiting from the very beginning. In Philippi, Paul began his ministry by sharing the gospel with Lydia. Lydia and her whole household believed, and Paul’s role changed to become a disciple maker and church planter in

that city. With the addition of the jailor and his family, the formation of a church began. In each location, he repeated the same pattern.

Paul's example should lead missionaries to ask in what phase of ministry they find themselves. Once an accurate diagnosis is made, the missionary can proceed to find the right teammates and engage relevant methodologies to push the ministry forward along the continuum. Soon, like Paul, they will find themselves with partners competent not only to lead local churches and reach their own *oikos*, but also ready to join them in bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth.

With this goal in mind, effective missionaries and missionary teams will be able to avoid the pitfalls of seemingly exclusive methodologies because they know when to focus their energy on strategies that advance the ministry based on the needs of their current phase. They know when to focus their energy on evangelism and when to focus on discipleship. They know when to focus on multiplication and when to focus on church health and leadership development.

## NOTES

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1.
2. Ideally, the missionary would not be working alone, but would be part of a missionary team with different members exercising different gifts. In reality, the ideal is not always possible.
3. <http://peoplegroups.org/>
4. See Robin Hadaway, "A Course Correction in Missions: Rethinking the Two-Percent Threshold," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, January 2015.
5. For an excellent example of this strategy, see Mike Shipman, *Any Three* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2013).
6. The term "milk-based discipleship" comes from Hebrews 5:11-14 which implies simple teachings need to be shared with new believers as quickly as possible, to be followed later by solid food—more advanced teachings for the mature (or at least maturing) disciple.
7. Discipleship strategies developed on the mission field include Avery Willis' *Master Life* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T* (Monument CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011), and George Patterson's "Seven Basic Commands of Christ" found in "The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Ralph D. Winter and Stephen C. Hawthorne, editors, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1992).
8. Matthew 28:18-20.
9. In South Asia, these trainings include *Four Fields*, a simple strategy for church multiplication; *Foundations*, a basic framework for understanding the message of the entire Bible; *Principles*, which introduces disciples to the process of hermeneutics and homiletics; and *Confessions*, helping believers develop a biblically based systematic theology.
10. For a full explanation of the *oikos* approach, see <https://makedisciples.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/Oikos-Evangelism-Thom-Wolf.pdf>
11. Ephesians 1:9.

12. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

13. Paul's pattern was to travel as part of team, enlisting disciples to join him in his journeys, and then dropping them off at a new place when their gifts were needed to strengthen emerging churches. Some co-workers served as Paul's patron's (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:5), others opened their homes and served as host or hostess (Acts 9:11; Gal. 1:18; Acts 16:33; Acts 17:5-9; Rom. 16:23; Acts 21:16, Philemon 22). Many others were called traveling companions, helpers, co-workers and fellow prisoners (Acts 16:6; 19:22; 20:4; 2 Tim. 4:11, and Philemon 23, 24). Paul also would send his partners to start new work without him (Acts 19:22; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:5).