

“I cannot imagine that any church serious about Jesus, his gospel, and his Word could not make excellent use of this short book that engagingly articulates old ‘ministry values’ in fresh and memorable ways. Don’t be satisfied with one copy; buy a box of them and distribute them widely.” (from the Foreword)

**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and President of The Gospel Coalition

“It is often said that gospel truth is not merely the means for conversion but is also a shaping power for all Christian life and ministry. But such a statement is often followed by generalities. Richard Coekin has developed a robustly biblical and eminently practical handbook for applying the gospel to the ministry of the local church. I recommend it!”

**Timothy Keller**, Founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, and President of City to City

“I have the highest possible regard, and gratitude to God, for the work of Co-Mission so faithfully led by Richard Coekin over these recent years. This book contains not only a faithful and masterful exposition of Acts 20 but also numerous helpful insights on gospel churches and Christian leadership from one who has been greatly used by God in our generation. It will be a most useful study for church leaders and leadership teams. I recommend it wholeheartedly.”

**William Taylor**, Rector of St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London

“One of our great needs is to have our hearts attuned to the heart of God. Richard’s book, “Gospel DNA”, serves this need wonderfully. And it does this by going straight to a passage rich with the themes and values of a gospel heart: Acts 20. The book is clear and easy to grasp, but deeply profound in its simplicity—and hugely practical and useful. A book to read and share.”

**Andrew Heard**, Senior Minister, EV Church, and founding Director of “Geneva Push” church-planting network

“Richard Coekin’s biblically rich, Christ-centred insights will encourage you to bolder evangelism, greater care for the integrity of the church and more careful exposition of the Scriptures. Be warned, this little book may inspire you to plant a church as the gospel’s DNA replicates itself in your community.”

**Dr. Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“A gem of a book which takes us back to the heart of gospel ministry—compelling us to keep teaching God’s Word, pastoring his flock, seeking the lost and standing firm for biblical truth in a hostile culture. Immensely practical, biblically insightful, very humbling, and packed with helpful, personal examples. Brilliant!”

**Paul Dale**, Senior Pastor, Church by the Bridge, Sydney

“I am glad to commend this book. It’s short, accessible and readable. It’s faithful to the text, helpful in its application and honest in its assessments. It’s from a particular context but it speaks to a wider audience. Richard has served us all well in writing it.”

**Steve Timmis**, Global Executive Director, Acts 29

“There can be no better teacher on Christian discipleship, ministry and church-planting than the apostle Paul. And I can’t think of anyone who could do a better job of applying his principles to today than Richard Coekin. I highly recommend this book.”

**Vaughan Roberts**, Rector of St Ebbe’s Oxford and Director of the Proclamation Trust

“This book is an ideal resource to help church leaders and church leadership teams re-evaluate their vision, programme and ministries. The immense gospel need in the UK today would perhaps begin to be addressed if every local church in the country were to reflect the gospel DNA outlined in this book.”

**John Stevens**, National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches

# **GOSPEL DNA**

**21 MINISTRY VALUES FOR  
GROWING CHURCHES**

**RICHARD COEKIN**

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*For my dear brothers and sisters in Christ  
in all the congregations of the Co-Mission  
church-planting movement, with love and gratitude  
for our partnership in gospel ministry*

*“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy  
of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you  
or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you  
stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the  
faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by  
those who oppose you.” Philippians 1:27-28*

Gospel DNA  
© Richard Coekin/The Good Book Company, 2017

Published by  
The Good Book Company  
Tel (UK): 0333 123 0880. International: +44 (0) 208 942 0880  
Email: [info@thegoodbook.co.uk](mailto:info@thegoodbook.co.uk)

Websites:  
North America: [www.thegoodbook.com](http://www.thegoodbook.com)  
UK: [www.thegoodbook.co.uk](http://www.thegoodbook.co.uk)  
Australia: [www.thegoodbook.com.au](http://www.thegoodbook.com.au)  
New Zealand: [www.thegoodbook.co.nz](http://www.thegoodbook.co.nz)



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ISBN: 9781784980894

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Design by André Parker. Printed in the UK

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# Foreword

D. A. Carson

Most Christians living in the UK who are interested in church planting will have heard of Richard Coekin and Co-Mission. My hope is that the publication of *Gospel DNA* will introduce this fledgling but seminal movement to many people in the US, as well as being of great service to those in the UK who wish to learn from the principles that underpin this growing church network.

Beginning with one small London church, Richard and those he has gathered around him for training and church planting have so far seen about thirty churches spring up, in London and its suburbs, with the aim of seeing another thirty planted by 2025, and (please God) 360 a little further down the road. One of the great wonders of Co-Mission, which provides the ministry structure for the movement, is its diversity: it includes people with posh backgrounds and Oxbridge degrees, and people with blue-collar backgrounds and sketchy education, and quite a lot in between. Similarly, these thirty churches reach out to very diverse segments of London's colorful and varied demographics. When a large percentage of these church members gather together for

a weekend conference in June each year under the banner *Revive*, one of the startling (and hugely enjoyable) features of the assembled crowd is how diverse and unpretentious it is.

As he looks to the future, Richard is the first to acknowledge two things: first, there is no certainty—certainly no biblical promise—that the growth goals will be met; second, that by the standards of some rapidly expanding ministries in other parts of the world, the reach of Co-Mission still belongs to a day of small things—though in terms of reaching secular Londoners, the results so far are wonderfully encouraging.

This is not the place to outline the ways in which Richard fosters theological formation, or to explore the mentoring systems he has put in place, or to reflect on their use of strategic retreats for the church planters, and much else besides. One of the things that no observer can miss, however, is the effort of everyone in the movement to bring everything to the test of Scripture, and to become unreservedly loyal to a robust grasp of the gospel—what an older generation of evangelicals would have called adherence to a combination of the formal (Scripture) and material (gospel) principles.

One way in which this is distilled into the minds and hearts of new converts and church planters alike is through sharing the principles that you will find in *Gospel DNA*. This book is less an exposition of Acts 20:17-38, Paul's address to the Ephesian Elders, than a meditation on the passage—a meditation that distills twenty-one “ministry values” that surface in the text. These Richard casts as imperatives. Some of them are predictable—for example, “Teach the Bible because God is speaking its words today,” or “Seek repentance and faith because anything less isn't salvation.” Others are more tantalizing—for instance, “Accept unavoidable risk because God is sovereign,” “Preach

the kingdom because the best is yet to come,” “Warn about judgment because we want to be innocent of blood,” “Tell the whole truth because a distorted gospel doesn’t save,” and “Trust God because he is utterly magnificent.” Co-Mission wants to see this “Gospel DNA” shaping all its churches, all its converts, all its church planters.

I cannot imagine that any church serious about Jesus, his gospel, and his Word could not make excellent use of this short book that engagingly articulates old “ministry values” in fresh and memorable ways. Don’t be satisfied with one copy; buy a box of them and distribute them widely.

*D. A. Carson*  
*Research Professor of New Testament,*  
*Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Illinois;*  
*President of The Gospel Coalition*



# Preface

*Gospel DNA* explores an electrifying training seminar for church leaders in Acts 20. It was delivered by an utterly extraordinary man of God—the evangelising, church-planting missionary Apostle Paul. This seminar not only offers unique insights into how Paul launched and strengthened multiple ministries in diverse contexts across first-century Turkey and Greece; it also clarifies God’s foundational principles for effective gospel ministry in every age—with some radical challenges to the way we do church today! God has given us DNA in our bodies to carry genetic information that multiplies our distinctive physical characteristics, such as brown eyes or red hair, in our biological families. He has given us the “Gospel DNA” in this passage to multiply his distinctive spiritual characteristics in his church families. This book clarifies God’s Gospel DNA, revealed in the Apostle Paul’s sensational gospel ministry, for our churches today. Moreover...

*Gospel DNA* describes how these gospel-ministry principles have been applied in the churches of Co-Mission—an exciting church-planting movement that God is growing in London, UK. Named after Christ’s “Great Commission” to make disciples of all nations, we were formed in 2005. From one small congregation in a school hall, God has grown us and enabled us to pioneer and establish about thirty new churches and ministries: some

in the suburbs and some in the city centre, some working with urban elites and others in deprived housing estates or ethnic communities; others still are missions—to business people in Mayfair, homeless people in Victoria, and government workers and Members of Parliament in Westminster. Our emerging strategic plan is to plant thirty more churches by 2025, and our big hairy “360 Vision” is to launch 360 Reformed evangelical churches for London for Christ. God hasn’t promised this—we may well fail! But we don’t want to die wondering—so we’re having a go. The growth we’ve witnessed, modest compared with some parts of God’s global mission, but dramatic for a secular city like London, has been generated by God through ministries massively shaped by the Apostle’s seminar in this passage in Acts 20. Indeed, much of the material in this book derives from the year-long ministry-training course that I have developed over the last 25 years, and through which so many Co-Mission pastors and planters have been trained. So this book clarifies what we pray is not only Paul’s DNA, but also our Co-Mission DNA.

*Gospel DNA* is not a commentary or exposition. Rather, it identifies the major ministry themes as Paul mentions them, and explores what we learn elsewhere in Scripture about them—like descending in a hotel lift and getting out at each floor to explore a little. So *Gospel DNA* is for:

- **everyone** because it provides principles for gospel ministry in every age.
- **church leaders** because it clarifies foundations for apostolic church ministry.

This book is therefore ideal for ministry-training courses and leadership teams. Enjoy!

*Richard Coekin*  
*Director of Co-Mission, London*  
*April 2017*

# Acts 20:17-38

<sup>17</sup> From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. <sup>18</sup> When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. <sup>19</sup> I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. <sup>20</sup> You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup> I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup> However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

<sup>25</sup> “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. <sup>27</sup> For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. <sup>28</sup> Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

<sup>32</sup> “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. <sup>35</sup> In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

<sup>36</sup> When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. <sup>37</sup> They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. <sup>38</sup> What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

# 1. Learning from a legend

why Paul's teaching in Acts 20  
is so precious today

Many centuries ago, I played rugby. One unforgettable highlight was when Clive Woodward, the hugely talented England player and future England coach, came to supervise a training session. I recall that he didn't do anything complicated. He took us right back to the fundamental principles of passing and tackling, and it was utterly electric. Especially because he was showing us how to do what we would watch him doing on television, scoring sensational tries for England.

It's the same in Acts 20. Paul was an original Apostle—authorised by the risen Christ to proclaim the gospel for him to the nations (Acts 9:15). He was also the heroic missionary, evangelist, church-planter and pastor. The man was a legend! And here in this passage we read of him training some local church leaders from Ephesus (a cosmopolitan regional capital city on the west coast of Turkey) by taking them back to the essentials of gospel ministry. Nothing complicated. He just

explains what he'd been doing among them and on all his missionary journeys.

Here are three reasons why this sparkling passage should continue to have a formative influence upon us and our churches today:

*First*, this passage is a unique example of Paul's leadership training. The book of Acts is the second volume of a carefully researched history written by Luke. It describes what Jesus continued to do after his resurrection, by his Holy Spirit empowering his Apostles to proclaim the gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In this mission to the nations, it's often missed that Paul didn't only travel round Turkey and Greece evangelising and church planting. He also returned to the churches he'd started, "strengthening the disciples" (Acts 14:21-22; 15:41).

Luke includes various examples in Acts of Paul's evangelistic teaching, but this passage in Acts 20 is his unique example of how Paul strengthened the churches—by coaching their leaders in gospel ministry, so they could then train the members of the church. This was the way the churches could keep growing and multiplying with his "apostolic" gospel ministry at their core. Luke gives us a brief but brilliant summary of this momentous leadership seminar. He's clearly using Paul's own colourful phraseology, so that we can hear his coaching for ourselves. Since this passage is so special in Scripture, it remains precious to us today.

*Second*, in God's sovereign grace, Paul intentionally reflects upon aspects of his own gospel ministry that should be a pattern for future generations, and Luke recognises this by recording it. In this seminar, he focuses on three areas of his ministry that were not restricted to his special role as an Apostle but are for all generations:

- Proclaiming the gospel (v 20-27)
- Guarding the church (v 28-31)
- Providing the Word (v 32-35)

And in each section, he reminds them of how he'd already done what he's now telling them to do:

“You know how I lived ... Remember that for three years I ...  
In everything I did, I showed you...”      Acts 20:18, 31, 35

Paul was plainly urging church leaders then and now to follow his example. We're not learning from a pompous, church-growth guru playing with radical theories in his comfortable university study! We're learning directly from Christ's missionary Apostle, who'd done it all before and carried the scars to prove it. Since these are the words of God, we must all listen and learn; since these are also the words of an Apostle who intends leaders to follow his example, our leaders must be ready to change. This teaching was clearly intended to shape the gospel ministry of church leaders everywhere and always!

*Third*, this training material remains particularly relevant today because it's not restricted to Paul's particular historical context. The heart of Paul's church-growth strategy for every culture was essentially the same: *Bible-teaching!* Indeed, in just a few verses he makes several references to its centrality in his ministry to them:

“preach ... taught ... declared ... testifying ... preaching ...  
proclaim...”      Acts 20:20-27

And the silence about other aspects of ministry is stunning! This was clearly not a summary of his whole theology, so there are many important doctrines left unmentioned. But it

was a summary of his foundational gospel-ministry themes and principles.

Luke records nothing about any strategies, staff teams or events he found useful. Indeed, there's nothing about community service, nothing about sacraments and nothing about useful cultural apologetics. In fact, we don't even hear anything about *how* to evangelise or *how* to plant or *how* to preach—much of which would have been specific to Paul's context. We know from the New Testament that these things were important to Paul, and presumably he did discuss these things with the Ephesian Elders that day (after all, what we do read here wouldn't have taken long to say!). But they're plainly not timeless essentials to be included here by Luke.

This is not an excuse for us to neglect the hard work of clarifying organisational strategies, cultural apologetics and expository preaching patterns for our own generation. Leaders with oversight of local churches must attend to these. But Luke is concerned here with Paul's training in foundational biblical themes and principles, and not with the widely varying strategies, skills and ministry cultures that we'll need to build upon them to be effective in different contexts today.

So these themes and principles will not be the whole of a leader's ministry. But they should be the foundations of all we do! The Co-Mission network I serve has planted in a wide variety of cultural contexts across London, each new church needing a very different strategic approach to evangelising their communities. But at the heart of all these strategies we must retain a commitment to the biblical themes and principles that Paul commends in this passage. The Apostle clearly intended them to be foundational for healthy local church life in every generation and culture.

Because these themes are so important, you will find that this book does not simply expound the verses here. Rather, in each verse, as we encounter a theme that is expanded on elsewhere in Scripture, we will briefly visit other parts of the Bible to understand that theme more deeply. After all, healthy biblical theology always interprets any part of Scripture in the light of the whole. You could say that, like descending in a lift from the top to the bottom of the passage, we will get out on every floor to have a little look around, in order to grasp something of the beauty of the whole building—which is faithful gospel ministry.

Finally, it is worth recognising in approaching this text that the cornerstone of these foundational ministry themes, whether in first-century Ephesus or twenty-first-century London, is “the good news (gospel) of God’s grace”. Paul says his life is completely surrendered to “testifying to the good news of God’s grace”, and he is happy to entrust the Ephesian church to “the word of his grace, which can build you up” (v 24, 32). Any teaching ministry that God uses to save people and grow churches today, whether in Tokyo, Melbourne, Rome, Montreal or London, will be devoted to believing and proclaiming the gospel of God’s grace—his stunning kindness towards us in Christ.

We shall see later how this gospel is all about Jesus Christ, our loving Saviour and living Lord. If a local church is the body of Christ, and the Bible is its heart, then “the good news of God’s grace” is the life-giving blood being continually pumped through the arteries of the various teaching ministries into all the organs and limbs of the church.

My prayer for anyone reading this book is that as you learn from the Apostle Paul, you will rejoice to discover, not only his foundational themes and principles for effective gospel

ministry, but the lifeblood of that ministry in “the good news of God’s grace”, which saves sinners and builds churches today.

### **Think it through**

1. *What kinds of church ministry are you currently involved in? What would you say were their primary purpose and character?*
2. *Which church leaders / authors have had the greatest influence on your understanding of how to serve God in the past? How do you feel about learning from the Apostle Paul in Acts 20?*
3. *Write down below what you think are the most important elements of a local church ministry—that is, what do you think church leaders and members should primarily be involved in week by week? After you have finished reading this book, you could come back to reflect on this list and see whether studying Paul’s teaching in Acts 20 has changed your view of church ministry.*

**Church leaders:** *How can you ensure that the gospel of God’s grace is central in your church?*