



THE GREAT COMMISSION AND CHURCH PLANTING

J. D. Payne

It has been said that if you do not know where you are going, you will get there every time. The same adage can be applied to church planting. I have encountered individuals who have planted churches, but confessed that they did not have a clue as to what they were doing in the planting process. Though there are many ways to plant churches, some ways are better than others. The purpose of this chapter is to examine some introductory issues related to carrying out the Great Commission via church planting. This purpose will be fulfilled by examining biblical/theological, missiological, methodological, and strategic elements necessary for a healthy understanding of church planting, which can lead to church planting movements. Practical application will be addressed in the discussion of each of these four categories.

In its most basic essence, biblical church planting is evangelism resulting in congregationalization. A more extensive definition of biblical church planting is as follows:

Biblical church planting follows the way modeled by Jesus and imitated by the Apostolic Church for global disciple making. It is a methodology and strategy for bringing in the harvest, raising up leaders from the harvest, and sending leaders to work in the harvest fields. It is evangelism resulting in congregationalizing. Under the leadership and work of the Holy Spirit, biblical church planting seeks to translate the gospel and the irreducible ecclesiological minimum into any given social context, with the expectation that new communities of believers in turn will continue the process in their contexts and throughout the world.

Biblical and Theological Basis for Church Planting

Because the church was conceived in the heart of God, any discussion of church planting must begin with the Scriptures. In the realm of the theological, church planting emerges where ecclesiology and missiology overlap. Stuart Murray noted “Church planting reminds

missiologists that the church plays a pivotal role in mission. . . . Church planting reminds ecclesiologists that mission is the primary task of the church.”¹

Contemporary readers of the New Testament must recognize that the Great Commission was given in a church planting context. The early believers were to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. The only way for this mandate to be carried out until Christ’s second advent was through communities of believers in particular geographical areas. At the inception of Jesus’ words, only one such community existed; out of necessity and faithfulness, other communities would have to be birthed.

Way of Jesus

According to the above definition, biblical church planting follows the *way modeled by Jesus*. The obvious question arises: “What was the way modeled by Jesus as related to church planting?” In the gospels, Jesus manifested a highly relational, simple, and reproducible pattern of discipleship and leadership development with the early disciples. Examining the Gospels, one can discern the following pattern: model the lifestyle, release for service, reflect on the experiences, remodel the lifestyle, resend for service.²

A comparison of the sending of the Twelve and the seventy-two as a case study reveals this pattern.³ Because Jesus had already *modeled* His lifestyle before the disciples (see first nine chapters of Matthew and first eight chapters of Luke), He *released* them for a particular work. After the disciples completed their healing and preaching ministries, Jesus reminded the jubilant preachers that they should not be so concerned with the power they had over demons;

¹Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*, North American ed. (Scottsdale, PE; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001), 54.

²I am not suggesting that Jesus followed this form of leadership development in a linear format (i.e., step one, then step two, then step three, etc.). Rather, I see these five different characteristics of the way of Jesus interweaving with one another and occurring at different times during the years of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

³See Matthew 10:1-11:1 and Luke 9:1-27 for the sending of the Twelve. See Luke 10:1-24 for the sending of the seventy-two.

rather, He admonished them to *reflect* on the fact that they should rejoice because their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:17-20). Throughout the rest of the Gospels, Jesus constantly *remodels* the lifestyle before the believers, ultimately *resending* them to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19).

Of particular interest to contemporary church planters are Jesus' patterns emphasizing the importance of working with receptive peoples and releasing even new believers to proclaim the gospel. First, in the studies of the sending of the Twelve and the seventy-two, Jesus told the disciples to focus their attentions on those receptive to the gospel (Matt 10:11-16; Luke 10:5-16). While they were not to ignore the non-receptive, they were to focus on those ready to hear.

Second, Jesus understood that the Father was always at work in the world (John 5:17), and He trusted the Father to bring about His purposes—even through new believers. For example, in Mark 5 Jesus encountered a demon possessed man from the region of the Gerasenes. Following this man's deliverance from bondage, he eagerly desired to travel with Jesus (Mark 5:18). Rather than take this man under His wing and protect him from the evils of the world, Jesus immediately released this new believer to the Decapolis to testify to the power of God (Mark 5:19-20). Church planters are wise to encourage new believers to become immediate witnesses of God's grace.

Imitation by Apostolic Church

According to the definition of church planting, biblical church planting follows the way modeled by Jesus and *imitated by the Apostolic Church* for global discipling. An examination of the New Testament beyond the Gospels reveals that the Apostolic Church imitated the patterns modeled by Jesus. At times, Paul even stated that his readers should be "imitators" of him and of the Lord (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Eph 5:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess

3:9). Peter reminded his readers that Jesus was an example that we should follow (1 Peter 2:21). Paul preferred to preach to receptive audiences and departed from resistant soils (Acts 13:49-51; 18:6). Philip baptized the Ethiopian, and sent him on his way without a time of training (Acts 8:39-40). Much of the time Paul and his companions entered a city, planted a church, and soon afterward, departed to repeat the process.

The Apostolic Church realized that the Father was working, and could even work, when they were not around. They realized that it did not take years for a church to come into existence. Further, while recognizing the Pauline admonition that an elder not be a “new convert” (1 Tim 3:6), they appointed elders in new congregations in a short time after their inception (Acts 14:21-28; Titus 1:5).

Practical Application

The greatest problem in North American church planting is a theological problem. Many North Americans fail to understand the ontology (nature) and praxis (functions) of the Church. Usually, our cultural understanding of a North American “church” swallows our biblical understanding of church, leaving behind a distorted understanding of a New Testament church. For many, the cultural cannot be separated from the biblical. For others who are willing to take the risk to do honest exegetical work, the resulting improper question that generally arises is “How can I now make the biblical understanding of church fit into my cultural understanding of church?”

The place to begin in church planting is with a biblical understanding of church—an understanding that does not require the Bible to bow to the spirit of our cultures. Begin by prayerfully restudying the Scriptures and seek to answer the following questions:

- What is the church?
- What is necessary for a church to exist in any context, at any time, in

- any geographical location?
 - What are the requirements for a church to be planted?
 - What are the requirements to be a leader in the church?
 - What was the role of community (fellowship) in the life of the
- Apostolic Church? What did this community look like, practically speaking?
 - What was the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and the life of the Apostolic Church?

A Missiological Basis for Understanding Church Planting

A missiological basis for understanding church planting seeks to discover the missionary principles upon which church planting exists. A return to the Scriptures is necessary for developing this basis. Though many such principles exist, space will permit the discussion of only five: homogenous units, persons of peace, bridges of God, receptivity, and missionary faith.

In church planting, most of the time, it is advantageous to work among homogenous units. The principle behind this notion is the sociological fact that many people like to become Christians without crossing cultural barriers to follow Christ.⁴ Homogeneous units manifest themselves in a variety of ways in any given context. Though many tend to think of these units solely in racial and socio-economic classifications, they extend well beyond ethnicity and wealth. Migrant workers spending summers at orchards, athletic groups on a college campus, people living within the same subdivision, and managerial employees at a corporation are all examples of homogenous units. The common bonds between individuals making up these units are excellent opportunities for the gospel to penetrate throughout the units, thus allowing the people to come to Christ and express themselves in a cultural manner in which they feel comfortable. The result may be several new churches.

Closely connected with homogenous units is the church planting principle of the "person

⁴Or, as Donald McGavran wrote, "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers." See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 198

of peace.” The person of peace is usually someone who is receptive to the gospel and has many relationships with others in his or her culture. Jesus modeled this pattern before His disciples. Luke 5:27-29 records Matthew’s call to follow Jesus, followed by a reception for Jesus at his home in the presence of many people. Jesus informed His disciples to look for this type of receptive person whenever they entered a town or village (Matt 10:11-13; Luke 10:5-9). The Apostolic Church imitated Jesus’ pattern as noted in the stories of Cornelius (Acts 10:23-48), Lydia (Acts 16:13-15), and Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:3).

Whenever a person of peace is located, he or she will hopefully become the messenger for the gospel to enter into the particular context. God in His sovereignty has established “bridges” (i.e., relationships) for the gospel to spread naturally throughout any given community. Church planters need to understand that the person of peace who already has inroads into the population can usually be more effective at reaching the people in his or her circles of influence than the church planters themselves.

Though already discussed, the principle of receptivity is another vital issue in church planting. Jesus told a parable of different types of soil that yielded different results after the farmer scattered the seed (Matt 13:1-23). Time and again, Jesus’ own ministry revealed the notion of the seed falling on different soils. Throughout Acts the early disciples found receptive hearts that produced a good crop, as well as hardened hearts that rejected both the message and the messengers.

The final missiological basis to be discussed is the principle of missionary faith. Roland Allen described this faith as a faith in the Holy Spirit to bring about good works in the lives of the new believers (Eph 2:10), to seal new believers (Eph 1:13-14), to bless new believers with every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3), and to keep new believers from falling and to present them

without fault (Jude 24).⁵ For example, Paul and his teams sometimes spent a short period of time with a group and then departed to plant other churches. Even after warning the Ephesian elders of false teachers, Paul was able to say before his departure “And now I commend you to God and the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32 NIV). This kind of missionary faith allows church planters to plant a congregation and trust God with the results.

Practical Application

Here are several questions to consider in assisting one in applying these missiological principles to a church planting situation. First, have pockets of people been identified that share a common bond, a homogenous unit? Again, this bond could be a similar socio-economic status, racial status, occupation, hobby, or geographical location.⁶ Second, what is taking place to locate the person(s) of peace within the group? How much time is being spent in prayer for this individual(s)? How much outreach into the community is occurring?

Third, upon finding the person(s) of peace, what is being done to assist them in reaching their family members, friends, and acquaintances with the gospel? What is being accomplished to facilitate the spread of the gospel across the bridges that God has established between the person(s) of peace and his or her circles of influence? Fourth, whenever a group of believers come together to be the church, how are they being taught to “obey everything I commanded” (Matt 28:20)? What is being done to allow the Holy Spirit to raise up pastoral leaders from among the new believers? How much is the church planting team willing to trust the Holy Spirit

⁵Roland Allen, “The Place of ‘Faith’ in Missionary Evangelism,” *World Dominion* 8 (1930): 237.

⁶Even within certain homogeneous units, other homogeneous units can exist. For example, even within certain ethnic groups living within close proximity to one another, there will be well educated and poorly educated, blue collar workers and white collar workers, young and old. Sometimes it may be necessary to focus on a sub-group within the larger homogenous unit.

with His church?

A Methodological Basis for Church Planting

C. Peter Wagner once noted “the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”⁷ Though I believe Wagner stated a missiological truth, not all church planting methods are the same, and all church planting cannot be labeled “the single most effective evangelistic methodology.” Returning to the definition, church planting is also a methodology . . . *for bringing in the harvest, raising up leaders from the harvest, and sending leaders to work in the harvest fields.* There are many ways to plant churches; therefore, one must be discerning in developing a church planting methodology that will best result in the multiplication of disciples, leaders, and churches. This section will attempt to discuss briefly a two guidelines that should govern the development of church planting methodologies.

First, any church planting methodology should be contextualized among the given people. As little as possible of the cultural understandings of “church” from the church planting team should be imported onto the new believers. Just because the church planters like a certain music style, preaching style, leadership style, organizational structure, and philosophy of ministry does not mean that those cultural preferences will be culturally palatable to the new church. The church planters need a thorough understanding of the culture(s) of the homogeneous units. The Spirit and the Scriptures should guide the new churches in how to *be* the churches in their own contexts.

The church planting team must have a proper understanding of the basic essence of church (i.e., the most basic elements necessary for a church to exist in any given culture, in any given time, in any given place). After coming to a biblical understanding of church, the team

⁷C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 11.

should seek to plant this biblical understanding, with as little of their cultural traditions of church as possible being imported onto the people.

Second, any church planting methodology should be highly reproducible among the given people. Church planters should desire to see the multiplication of churches. From the time the church planting team enters a particular field, they are serving as a model of what both Christ and His church are supposed to look like. The people are learning even before they come to Christ. Everything the team does is serving as a visual teaching tool before the people. The odds are good that in the future the new believers will continue to use (or never use) the same church planting methodology as used by the church planting team.

Just because the church planters can carry out a certain church planting method that results in a newly planted church does not mean that the new believers can reproduce that same methodology. In most cases, whenever highly trained leadership, large financial subsidies, and elaborate structures are required for church planting, a church planting movement will never occur. Though church planting is a simple concept, it is easy to complicate church planting by using methodologies that only few can use.

Practical Application

Rick Warren suggests that churches should get to know the people demographically, culturally, geographically, and spiritually.⁸ This information can be discovered through a variety of sources such as public libraries, Chambers of Commerce, maps, denominational agencies, marketing firms, and other leaders within the community. Though this information is both necessary and helpful, it usually gives the big picture rather than the details church planters need. For example, it is possible to develop a stereotypical individual that is supposed to

⁸Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 161-69.

represent the people group to whom a team feels called. Because this type of information offers an aerial view of the people representing the area, it is likely that the team can spend significant time trying to reach the stereotype, yet never finding him or her. Church planters need to learn to spend time with the people and learn from them. They must learn from them and listen to them. They must listen to them and discern how to effectively share the gospel with them.

Church planters can follow the highly contextual and reproducible P.A.W. approach in their methodologies used. First, they need to pray (P). They need to pray for the person(s) of peace, pray for discernment regarding the overall methodology used, pray for opportunities to share the gospel. Second, church planters need to act (A). They must do something! Church planting cannot be done in an office or in seclusion. Church planters must get out into the community with the people. They need to learn to drink coffee and hang out with people in the community. They need to learn to cook a simple meal, and have people into their homes. They need to do servant evangelism projects. They should prayerwalk a community. They can go door to door visiting throughout a community. Finally, church planters need to watch (W). They need to watch God act. He desires the salvation of the people more than the church planters. Church planters must watch His Spirit at work and join Him. They need to watch for the person(s) of peace to emerge from the context. They must watch for emerging leaders from among the new believers.

A Strategic Basis for Understanding Church Planting

Concerning the definition, church planting is also a *strategy* for bringing in the harvest, raising up leaders from the harvest, and sending leaders to work in the harvest fields. Charles Brock stated, “If the church planter is fully aware of the need for ‘thinking reproducible’ in

everything done, he will more likely plant a church capable of reproduction.”⁹ If the desired result is the multiplication of disciples, leaders, and churches, then one should strategize accordingly from the beginning.

The development of a church planting strategy should be done with caution. On the one hand, having no strategy is unwise. On the other hand, being too rigid with strategy is also unwise. Paul had a strategy, but was flexible with it. He wanted to go to Asia, and God prevented Him (Acts 16:6); then he wanted to go to Bithynia, and God prevented Him (Acts 16:7). Thankfully, Paul was willing to allow his strategy to be conformed to the will of God, and his faithfulness resulted in the Philippian church (Acts 16:10).

Practical Application

Robert E. Logan stated, “Strategy translates vision into reality.”¹⁰ Aubrey Malphurs noted, “I define a strategy as the process that determines how you will accomplish the mission of the ministry.”¹¹ Regardless, of one’s understanding of strategy, there are three essential qualities of a mission strategy.¹² First, is the necessity of Bible-centeredness. How well does the overall strategy reflect a healthy understanding of the Scriptures? Second, a strategy needs to be efficient. Is the church planting team being a good steward with their resources (people, time, money, etc.)? Finally, the strategy needs to be relevant. Not all strategies will work in all contexts; therefore, the strategy itself needs to be contextualized. Malphurs added an additional component necessary for a good strategy.¹³ The strategy must be a process that moves people from an unregenerate state to maturity in Christ.

⁹Charles Brock, *The Principles and Practice of Indigenous Church Planting* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981), 55.

¹⁰Robert E. Logan and Steven L. Ogne, *The Church Planter’s Toolkit* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1994), IV-1.

¹¹Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategy 2000* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 55.

¹²See C. Peter Wagner, *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 16-17.

¹³Malphurs, *Strategy 2000*, 44.

In light of these thoughts from Wagner and Malphurs, church planters need to develop their strategies around an understanding of church planting that entails the multiplication of disciples, leaders, and churches. Like methodology, a strategy needs to be simple and reproducible. Brock noted:

Some will say any strategy or method will work; and this is true in many cases. But some strategies and methods may more likely lead to genuine faith and healthy reproducing churches. If reaching the world is important, then we must be careful to adopt strategies and methods which will allow us to be as effective as possible.¹⁴

Conclusion

Church planting is a biblical, effective, and efficient way to carry out the Great Commission. Within church planting, one observes the processes of going into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing many peoples, and teaching the Way of Jesus. Donald McGavran believed that “today’s paramount task, opportunity, and imperative in missions is to multiply churches in the increasing numbers of receptive peoples of the earth.”¹⁵ May contemporary generations realize the importance of the role of church planting in fulfilling Christ’s command.

J. D. Payne is a National Missionary with the North American Mission Board and serves as an Assistant Professor of Evangelism and Church Planting at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He can be contacted at jpayne@sbts.edu.

This article originally appeared in Chuck Lawless and Thom S. Rainer, *The Challenge of the Great Commission: Essays on God’s Mandate for the Local Church* (n.p.: Pinnacle Publishers, 2005), 107-20.

¹⁴Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 132.

¹⁵McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 63.