

SECOND EDITION

EX⁷

PLANTING MISSIONAL CHURCHES

YOUR GUIDE TO STARTING CHURCHES
THAT MULTIPLY



ED STETZER AND DANIEL IM

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Dedications

From Ed:

To church planters everywhere. May you make Jesus more famous.



From Daniel:

*To my wife, Christina,
thank you for joining me on this adventure and mission of
helping people taste and see the kingdom of God.*

*To my children Victoria, Adelyn, and Makarios,
our prayer is that Jesus and his vision for the kingdom would
capture your hearts and compel you through life.*



*Thanks to Micah Fries, Ryan Bush, Josh Laxton, Andrew
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Preface to the Second Edition

I believe in church planting. More to the point for this book, I believe in church planters.

I've started several churches and am planting another at the time of this writing, but it's the fact that I've trained planters that gets me most excited.

My first pastoral role was starting a church. My first book was on church planting. I wrote my PhD dissertation on the subject. My first seminary job was teaching church planting.

Some might say I'm obsessed. But I will say I am convinced. I am convinced that church planting is, and will always remain, a key part in the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Which brings me to you, my reader and, perhaps, a church planter like me. God bless you and your work. You're headed into the adventure of a lifetime, and I pray this book helps. And, if experience is the great teacher, it will. This book is jam packed with wisdom, insights, and ideas from people as passionate about church planting as I am.

Since the book's previous publication, much has changed in church planting. I have tried to reflect that here. Sources range from people who've studied the subject to people who've learned by doing and were willing to share their blunders as well as their successes. And what I couldn't fit into the volume you're holding spills onto NewChurches.com/PMC, which includes additional resources to help you in church planting and multiplication.¹

Between the book and the website, you have a toolbox of much more than you'll need. And that's the point. Because, as you'll soon see, there's no magic formula. (If there were, this would be a really thin book!)

I've written this book three times. Well, not all of it but lots of it. Each time I've thanked people because each time it was a team effort but never as much as it is now. So this time I have a coauthor, Daniel Im, who is in charge of church planting, multisite, and all things church multiplication for LifeWay. It's also his vision, strategy, and leadership to resource church multipliers, like you, that you will see and experience at www.NewChurches.com. He

loves the church and is a pastor at heart while also being obsessed with leadership development and church multiplication. Before coming to LifeWay, he served and pastored in church plants and multisite churches ranging from 100 to 50,000 people in Vancouver, Ottawa, Montreal, Korea, and Edmonton. So not only does he bring his Korean-Canadian background into this book, but he also brings a unique and global perspective to the table. You'll enjoy his stories and the new chapters he's written for this book.

Daniel and I have chosen to write the book in the format of the earlier books, written in first person and in my voice. But Daniel's contribution is evident and extensive and was key to the book's new content and completion.

At the end of the day, our prayer is that in this book we're giving you tools to help you be effective in church planting so that, whether you're planting in a small community in Maine, downtown Sydney, French-speaking Montreal, or a café in Amsterdam, you are able to plant a church that glorifies Jesus, reaches people who do not know Christ, and multiplies itself over and over again.

Section 1

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHURCH PLANTING

The first major message of this book is to understand what *missional* means. Establishing a missional church means you plant a church that's engaging in God's mission, is focused on the kingdom, and is part of the culture you're seeking to reach. We used the words *mission* and *missional* in the previous sentences, and we'll also use the word *missions* in this book. Because all three words are so important, we need to define them before we go further:

Mission. The word *mission* refers to all that God is doing to bring the nations to himself.

Missions. The word *missions* relates to mission and refers to the pursuit of sharing and showing the gospel to all corners of the earth.

Missional. *Missional* means adopting the *posture of a missionary*, joining Jesus on mission, learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound.

In church planting the goal isn't to plant the coolest church or do things that have never been done before, but it's always to reach people, be on mission, and be about the kingdom of God. Your church may be composed of Koreans, African-Americans, young families, established professionals, baby boomers, millennials, or a combination of the above, but the important thing is that it is a church that is on a mission.

In most cases your church will be a combination of people. In many areas of the world today, we have such a rapidly growing and changing population that church planters can't afford to target such a specific niche that we miss one part of a mission field in favor of another. And that's the tricky part: understanding the complicated fabric our society is weaving without

becoming overwhelmed. For no church planter can do it all. You may gain a better understanding of families than singles. You may connect more with young professionals than retirees. But it's critical that you *learn* about the components of the mission field around you, *adapt* your approaches while remaining faithful to the gospel, and *reach* at least some of them as effectively as you can—all while leading people to be on mission.

So congratulations, reader, you're not only a church planter, but you are also on mission! And can you see how we've come to this? At the same time we're experiencing rapid population shifts, we're seeing enormous changes in attitudes, in worldviews. It's possible to be a missionary without ever leaving your city. And that's good because it helps you understand better than ever the second major message of this book, which is how the word *incarnational* relates to church planting.

Missional is the posture—we join Jesus on his mission to people in culture—but *incarnational* describes what's actually happening. Just as Christ came to live among us, we dwell with the people around us. In many ways we're like them. But we're changed, transformed; and because of that, we seek to change and transform.

The concept of being incarnational as it relates to church planting emphasizes the importance of relationships in effective church planting. It's not about establishing a location for worship; it's about establishing a basis for coming together in the first place. Good church planting depends on good relationships.

It also depends on solid *theology*, which is the third major message of this book. Relevance to the culture should never clash with the power of the gospel. There is much theological revisioning right now; some people are, in the name of missional thinking, abandoning basic theological messages. However, this book is not that book. Bible-based theology is the foundation for a successful church plant. No apologies for that!

The fourth major message is expressed in the word *ecclesiological*; the church matters. We know this because the New Testament is full of descriptions of how to transform the culture. The examples are all based on churches. Believers come together in churches, becoming stronger as individuals and as a body, with the goal of becoming the body, which in turn can transform the culture. That does not mean the goal of a church is a brick building, large group, or incorporation. Yet the biblical idea and model of church *does* matter and is the goal of church planting. Church matters.

Fifth, today's successful church planter is *spiritual*—focused on spiritual formation. This may sound like a no-brainer (and perhaps it should be). But to be realistic about the state of church planting in North America and in many areas of the world today, let's admit something: many church planters

are by nature entrepreneurs, mavericks, free spirits, sometimes even misfits. (Thank God he can use cracked pots.) That energy can be harnessed and focused to be used for God's glory but only if the church planter is Christ centered and transformed by the power of the gospel. In other words, a newcomer to a church needs to leave a church service being amazed by the awesome God the church planter serves, not by what a cool preacher the church has.

So let's begin this journey together with the foundations of church planting.

Chapter 1

The Basics of Church Planting

My (Ed) own experience in church planting began in June 1988. I'd just graduated from college with an undergraduate degree in natural sciences. I arrived in Buffalo, New York, ready to start my first church. I was twenty-one years old and had a vision to reach the entire city but little experience and no training. I didn't know it then, but desire wasn't enough. The church was not the great success I thought it would be. Although the church grew and we saw people changed by the power of the gospel, I could have avoided countless mistakes with proper training.

When I was planting this church, our district association was strategizing to plant seven new churches within three years. The church I started in inner-city Buffalo, Calvary Christian, continues to this day but in a different way. Since then the community has changed significantly, now being predominantly Vietnamese and Burmese. As a result, as of a few years ago, Calvary Christian is now Calvary Christian Vietnamese Church and has a new service to reach out and minister to the Burmese in the community. Now that's being missional.

Only one other district church plant from that time is still alive. It is a small church that took over the property of another church to survive. (One other church started, died, then restarted with a different name and location.) So an ambitious church planting effort that began with great enthusiasm dwindled to a whimper. Discouraged and demoralized, our church planting supervisor left the area and then the ministry. Untrained and discouraged pastors left the field for better salaries and better possibilities in established churches elsewhere.

My first church plant did not struggle because of lack of effort. I wore out my knuckles knocking on doors. With the help of partnership churches, we contacted tens of thousands of residents to start Calvary, canvassing

neighborhoods, ringing doorbells, talking to people on their front stoops and porches. When Calvary decided to sponsor a new congregation, Lancaster Bible Church, we did so with what we assumed was an innovative strategy, using billboards. The team generated many ideas and worked long hours, but little success followed. That church later died and was restarted.

In the '80s and '90s in western New York and across North America, some strategies had succeeded. Successful church plants had shared their methods of success with others. Practices such as direct mail, telemarketing campaigns, and large grand openings had appeared infrequently but had become hot topics of discussion.

At the first church I started, we began a direct-mail campaign and experienced some success. This piqued my interest in new techniques. However, many of these early methods no longer work as well as they once did, as I discovered in my next three church plants. The rapidly changing cultural landscape requires that we use different methods to reach different communities.

More important, many of us in church planting have begun to realize that some things need to change in our field of work. When I think about the churches I planted, I have to say that I missed a lot of the key values discussed in this book. When, at the age of twenty-one, I planted Calvary Christian Church, I must confess that the church was more about me than it was missional and spiritual. When I planted Millcreek Community Church and its daughter churches, we were more “attractional” than incarnational and not particularly theological or ecclesiological. Simply put, much of this book is birthed out of the struggle and failure of church planting.

Today much more material on church planting is available, and it's catching the interest of evangelicals. Church planting conferences meet regularly with thousands in attendance. Thousands of websites are devoted to church planting. Fifteen years ago, a Google search produced 244,000 sites; now there are close to 3 million. With vastly more material for church planting, that also means there's a lot more noise. So that's why Daniel Im, my coauthor, is heading up LifeWay's strategy to resource church planters, multiplying churches, and multisite churches—basically, everything that has to do with church multiplication. Our goal is to curate and create the best resources to help you and your church multiply.

Furthermore, many evangelical denominations have placed a renewed emphasis on the subject. That's good news, particularly when it's partnered with better biblical foundations than in years past.

Objections to Church Planting

The goal of church planting is glorifying God, growing his kingdom, and developing healthy churches with new converts. It's a godly, even respectable,

goal that other churches should appreciate. In fact, that respect for other churches should go in both directions. Nearby churches may be older, smaller, and more traditional, but they've paved the way for new churches to move ahead. And missional church planters focus on the Great Commission by reaching the unchurched, not by seeking to attract area Christians.

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Church planting is essential. Without it Christianity will continue to decline in North America. According to prolific author and consultant Bill Easum: "Studies show that if a denomination wishes to reach more people, the number of new churches it begins each year must equal at least 3% of the denomination's existing churches."¹ It's encouraging to see denominations take this seriously, like the International Pentecostal Holiness Church that planted not just 3 percent of their existing churches but close to 20 percent between 2004 and 2008.² Or take Converge Worldwide (formerly the Baptist General Conference), the leading US midsize denomination in church planting with a 6.4 percent growth in new churches in 2014. What impresses us most about Converge is that they report an 89 percent church plant success rate!³ "Denominations truly making a difference in the kingdom are those who foster environments that welcome true leaders, plan for multiplying growth, and celebrate new churches."⁴

In spite of this, some people in church circles are not enthusiastic about this new emphasis on church planting. Let's dig deeper and find out what's really going on.

Critics of church planting usually don't voice their objections in such a straightforward manner. They typically raise a predictable series of objections. Here are a few.

1. Large-Church Mentality

For many the idea of one large church is more attractive than multiple churches. Large churches have the resources and programs to be full-service congregations. Thus, many leaders think the most efficient denominational strategy is to help medium churches become large churches.

Despite this bigger-is-better mentality, statistics do not support the assumption that size is necessarily the best way to reach people. Though large churches are often more cost effective than small churches, new churches are often more effective than large churches in evangelism. On a per-capita basis, new churches win more people to Christ than established churches. The newer a congregation, the more effective that church is in reaching those who don't know Christ.

If we know new churches reach more people per capita and if we value reaching the unchurched, we must conclude that the most effective method of evangelism is church planting. And it's gaining new attention because it's a biblical method that works.

2. Parish-Church Mind-Set

Both the large-church mentality and the parish-church mind-set limit the number of churches possible in an area. A parish is simply a geographical region (Louisiana still calls its counties "parishes"). A denominational parish has historically been defined as a region needing only one church to meet the spiritual or congregational needs of its people in that area. This has its roots in Europe. Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians formally follow the parish model when planning the placement of new churches, and most other denominations follow it informally. They expect only one church to meet the denominational and spiritual needs of a specific area. Proposals for new churches meet resistance because a church already exists in the area proposed for a new congregation. That resistance shows the parish-church mind-set: if a denomination has one church in a "community," the denomination has sufficiently reached that community, or so the thinking goes.

Parish mentality is a primary reason the church-to-population ratio is declining. Churches often die because people move out of rural areas to urban and suburban settings. Yet new churches may not be started in the new urban and suburban area because they're too close to other established churches of the same denomination. The research team at the North American Mission Board recently calculated the church-to-population ratio based on statistics from the United States Census Bureau.

- In 1900, there were twenty-eight churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- In 1950, there were seventeen churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- In 2000, there were twelve churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- In 2011, the latest year available, there were eleven churches for every 10,000 Americans.⁵

In 1900, the US Census Bureau counted 212,000 churches. In 2010, the approximate number of churches in the United States was 350,000.⁶ In other words, the number of churches increased just over 50 percent while the population of the country has almost quadrupled. This decline in church-to-population ratio helps explain the decline of the North American church during the past century. It's frustrating to many evangelicals. At a minimum we should attempt to keep up with the population, but if we are truly to reach people, we should want to do much more!

3. Professional-Church Syndrome

One of the greatest hindrances to church planting (even in other places around the world) is the notion that all churches must have seminary-trained pastors to be legitimate. My personal belief is that seminary education is important in helping provide doctrinal stability, ministry skills, and spiritual depth. My point, however, is that years of academic training are not necessary to start a church. In fact, waiting for a seminary-trained pastor in many cases delays God-called people from starting a church.⁷

With the increased professionalization (education) of the clergy, church planting has suffered. Seminary-trained pastors often expect full-time salaries provided by established churches. During their years of education, seminarians sometimes accumulate significant debt that makes impossible either (1) bivocationalism (having two jobs, one ministry and one secular) or (2) volunteer ministry. On the other hand, denominational leaders often consider pastoral candidates without seminary training to be ineligible or unprepared to plant new churches. However, both history and present-day practices of several faith groups tell another story. American history records that lay preachers effectively planted many Methodist and Baptist churches along the American frontier.⁸ Roland Allen, a famous missiologist of the twentieth century, basically demonstrated that evangelistic growth in new churches is often inversely proportional to educational attainment.⁹ Allen believed the more education a pastor had, the less effective the pastor would likely be in the evangelistic task. Today charismatic and Pentecostal churches that plant other congregations encourage “anointed” persons, regardless of their level of theological training, to be their church planters.

It’s not surprising that Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, and Open Bible Standard churches have been some of the most effective church planting groups. This is specifically because of their openness to using God-called, though not formally trained, leaders in founding new churches.

If we limit ourselves by assuming pastors and church planters must be seminary graduates in order to plant new churches, we may never reach some areas of the world today such as expansive apartment complexes, mobile home villages, marinas, townhouse communities, and sparsely populated rural areas. Because of conditions such as poverty, transience, size, etc., many of these areas cannot support a “professional,” seminary-trained pastor expecting a full-time salary.

I caution, though, that doctrinal error easily emerges in movements that don’t provide adequate basic theological training in some way. Wise denominations provide a middle option: offering training by extension for interested lay leaders and bivocational pastors. Obviously the professional-church

syndrome is a difficulty denominations must overcome while simultaneously providing theologically sound and practical training for church planters.

4. Self-Protection Syndrome

As congregations become established and mature, the people who've invested themselves in those churches become protective, even wary of new ideas that might threaten the status quo. A new church plant—with all its excitement, attention, and buzz—seems like a competitor instead of a welcome newcomer. And why not? It's nice to be comfortable, isn't it? Protection and security are natural human tendencies (e.g., does your mother want her hard-earned retirement money invested in secure bonds and CDs or in a high-tech start-up company run by a bunch of twenty-somethings?).

Many pastors do understand the need for, let's say, a charismatic, Presbyterian, and Baptist church in each community to serve the needs of members in these denominations. Yet many of those same pastors are hesitant to plant another church similar to their own in the same geography even though a different music style or congregational approach might reach an entirely different population segment. *It could be competition*, they reason. *Worse, it might make the older church seem tired and out-of-date by comparison.*

That attitude can spread like the flu. Laypeople in established and perhaps traditional churches, who genuinely have a heart for reaching the lost, sense that their pastor or other powers that be are uncomfortable and suspicious of the neighboring church start. So they become wary as well. *What can those people be doing over there? The music is loud, and, well, they don't even meet in a proper church with an organ or a steeple.*

Some of these same laypeople may have a heart to reach others in, for example, Asia or Africa, but they still miss the reason for the needed change in churches around them: engaging in mission among a new people. Ironically, they're completely on board with sharing the gospel in the language of a tribe in a faraway land, but they don't realize that same missionary approach would be useful right there in Anytown. And they certainly don't drop in that new church just to see what's going on—like you might try that new restaurant your brother-in-law recommended—because that could be seen as disloyal to the church where they've invested so much of themselves. So the more they circle the wagons, the less they learn about church planting. And the cycle continues.

5. Rescue-the-Perishing Syndrome

This is the idealistic assumption that denominations should first rescue dying churches before planting new ones. Every church planter has heard the

objection: Why should we start new churches when so many struggle and die? However, saving dead and dying churches is much more difficult and ultimately more costly than starting new ones. Some authorities even argue that changing a rigid, tradition-bound congregation is almost impossible. As Lyle Schaller has indicated, even if it is possible, nobody knows how to do it on a large-scale basis.¹⁰

Starting new churches is much easier and, perhaps, a better overall stewardship of kingdom resources, just as it's sometimes more cost effective to purchase a new vehicle rather than pouring money into an old one to keep it running like new. Embracing a church's history and legacy is important, but the church cannot have lost its mission and direction without developing some serious oil leaks and knocks under the hood.

The ideal strategy, of course, is to do both—help revitalize dying churches and simultaneously plant new churches. We want to see dying churches revitalized. God has allowed me the privilege of leading four churches through the process of revisioning, and it's a wonderful experience. But we must also start new churches.

Stuart Murray addresses the issue well: "Current initiatives to plant thousands of new churches are ill-conceived unless these are accompanied by a significant reversal of the decades of decline. . . . There is no empirical evidence to support such an expectation at present."¹¹ Murray proposes, and I agree, that we need a strategy to revitalize established churches and, at the same time, to plant thousands of new churches. He explains: "Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many years. Planting more of these churches is not a mission strategy worth pursuing. But planting new kinds of churches may be a key to effective missions and a catalyst for the renewal of existing churches."¹²

Church revitalization does not happen much, but it does happen sometimes. I have been struck by how infrequently it actually occurs. During a breakfast conversation I had with seminary professor Leonard Sweet, Len explained to me that recent studies show that nine of ten people who are told by doctors to "change or die" cannot do so. In other words, they are told to stop smoking, lose weight, or quit drinking in order to survive, and nine of ten die rather than change. Churches are similar; they often choose their traditions over their future. But some can and do change.

Let's look at an example—the Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina, formerly named Homestead Heights Baptist Church. HHBC was planted in the early 1960s with the original vision to be a multiplying church. Thirty years later the original vision had become a mere memory, as it seemed that many in the congregation were more concerned about the internal needs of the members rather than reaching the lost. HHBC needed revitalization, and

the church needed to get back to its origin and focus on multiplication. This is what led the pastoral search committee to ask J. D. Greear, who was at the time the church's college pastor, to become their new lead pastor in 2002.

Changing the church's name to The Summit Church, they did much more than change their marquee. They started becoming intentionally missional in how they operated. In fact, the church sold their large, historic building to start meeting in a high school. This approach may seem backward to many traditional churches, but The Summit Church considered it a great opportunity to start afresh, become mobile, and look for a location that would better suit their mission. Over the next several years, The Summit Church experienced rapid growth in attendance; however, instead of keeping the growth in their own building, they began to start new campuses and plant new churches to reach the lost. Through much success in planting churches and seeing their churches plant churches, The Summit Church recently declared a bold new missional vision: to plant 1,000 multiplying missional churches globally by 2050.

WE NEED STRATEGIES TO REVITALIZE THOSE CHURCHES THAT DESIRE CHANGE, AND WE ALSO NEED TO PLANT THOUSANDS OF NEW CHURCHES EVERY YEAR.

The Summit Church is just one example. The point, of course, is that both revitalization and new church planting are needed. Unfortunately, many who call for the revitalization of dying churches do so while also finding "convincing" objections to church planting. We need strategies to revitalize those churches that desire change, and we also need to plant thousands of new churches every year. If growing the kingdom is our ultimate objective, we must admit that one can't be accomplished without the other.

6. Already-Reached Myth

Among the strongest myths that discourage church planting is the flawed understanding that the United States, Canada, and many other areas of this world are already evangelized. Certainly North American Christians have access to abundant resources of information. Evangelicals have been reading Dave Ramsey for financial information, listening to Focus on the Family for advice on raising children, singing along with Hillsong, and purchasing fiction by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. But unchurched persons in the English-speaking Western world remain generally untouched by this evangelical subculture and abide in darkness because we aren't drawing them in with a culturally relevant gospel witness.

While many Christian resources are available in our world, the unchurched no longer have a biblical worldview or understanding (some experts question whether they ever did). Instead, their religious ideas tend to be distorted reflections of biblical truth. In other words, secular people may be familiar

with certain religious terminology or ideas, but their familiarity is often a distortion of its original meaning. For example, the most-quoted Bible verse for many secular people consists of two words, “Judge not.” Though they know the verse, their understanding of its meaning is skewed. They believe it’s wrong to judge another person’s choices as wrong or immoral as long as those choices hurt no one. In fact, intolerance is becoming the unforgivable sin in our context.

The unchurched know Jesus said not to judge, but they seriously misunderstand biblical teachings on morals. For example, they have no understanding of the teaching on church purity in 1 Corinthians and the command that the church should judge in a redemptive spirit. When secular culture moves farther and farther from biblical norms, perceptions become shadows—even corruptions—of biblical reality.

7. Western Christianity in Hopeless Decline

This book is not just for Americans, as similar trends can be found around the world. The perception is that the Christian faith is dying and perhaps too far gone.

In 2015, the Pew Research Center released a report¹³ drawing a variety of headlines—everything from “Christianity faces sharp decline as Americans are becoming even less affiliated with religion”¹⁴ to “Pew: Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America.”¹⁵

Are those headlines true? Is US Christianity collapsing? Well, the big trends are clear: many of the “nominal” are becoming the “nones,” yet the “convictional” are remaining committed and relatively steady.¹⁶ In other words, Americans whose Christianity was nominal—in name only—are casting aside the name. They are now disavowing publicly what they’ve actually not believed all along.

One of the reasons it appears as though American Christianity is experiencing a sharp decline is because the nominals that once made up (disproportionately) mainline Protestantism and Catholicism are now checking “none” on religious affiliation surveys. Nominal Christians now make up a higher percentage of mainline Protestants and Catholics than any other denomination of Christian, and this is why their numbers continue to sharply decline. Yet church attendance rates (though overreported) are not changing substantially.

From 2007 to 2014, the number of evangelicals in America actually rose from 59.8 million to 62.2 million. Evangelicals now make up a clear majority (55 percent) of all US Protestants. In 2007, 51 percent of US Protestants identified with evangelical churches. Within Christianity the only group retaining more of their population than the evangelical church is the historically black

church. Christianity isn't dying and no research says it is; the statistics about Christians in America are starting to show a clearer picture of what American Christianity is becoming—less nominal, more defined, and more outside the mainstream of American culture. For example, the cultural cost of calling yourself “Christian” is starting to outweigh the cultural benefit, so those who do not identify as a “Christian” according to their convictions are starting to identify as “nones” because it's more culturally savvy.

There are challenges, don't misunderstand. Younger generations are not as engaged as prior generations—and that's part of the issue. In other words, multiple things are at work here, but the faith is not dying. So, Christians, we need not run around with our hands in the air and say, “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” Christianity is losing and will continue to lose its home field advantage in the US; no one can (or should) deny this. However, the numerical decline of self-identified American Christianity is partly a purifying bloodletting, partly demographic and also some religious changing.

In other words, some churches are dying, and our culture is changing, yet we know new churches can make a difference. Church planting is not easy, but without it the church will continue to decline in North America.

Conclusion

Obviously powerful ideas and mistaken attitudes work against church planting. Most of the North American church has not caught a vision for church planting and New Testament reproduction—at least not yet. Most Americans and Canadians are not connected to any local church. The North American church is in trouble. We need to plant new churches, or the church will continue to decline.

Even though some people oppose the idea of church planting, we must do it anyway because it's biblical. In the following pages you'll discover three compelling reasons to enact the biblical mandate for church planting: the command of Jesus, the need for new churches to reach North Americans, and the ineffectiveness of our present methodologies. You'll also find detailed explanations of practical how-tos of church planting in this book.

Church planting is slowly regaining its biblical prominence in evangelical life. Between 1980 and 2000, more than 50,000 churches were planted in North America.¹⁷ Christians are beginning to realize, once again, the need to place an emphasis on church planting in North America. And, even though there's some resistance to church planting, evangelicals are realizing its value and priority. Without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission. This book is written to inform, to clarify, to encourage, and to persuade evangelicals to embrace church planting. May your passion for planting churches and growing the kingdom of God be enhanced as you read.

Chapter 2

Redeveloping a Missional Mind-Set for North America

The North American church has experienced two seismic shifts over the course of the past few decades. The first shift is in relation to church planting. From when I planted in Buffalo until today, church planting has moved from the periphery and being a “suspicious activity” to being a focal point of many evangelical denominations. This is in large part due to the dynamic church plants over the last couple of decades such as Saddleback Community Church and Rick Warren, Willow Creek Community Church and Bill Hybels, Life Church and Craig Groeschel, NewSpring Church and Perry Noble, Redeemer Presbyterian Church and Tim Keller, and others.

The second seismic shift the North American church experienced is its cultural position. Especially over the past few decades, the church in North America has moved from its place in the center to a place on the side. Even with an increase in church planting and church growth, where more people are attending church than ever before in American history, the culture has not for the most part been changed. In fact, it has become more secular and pluralistic, with more people declaring “none” status.¹ Over this time it has become clear that Christians have lost their home-field advantage.

Many have referred to this seismic shift as the end of “Christendom,” the realm or time when Christianity was assumed the religion of the West. According to Douglas John Hall, the dismantling of Christendom has been underway for two centuries.² In any case, the North American church finds itself on the periphery, having been marginalized by the larger culture. Having become the “visiting” rather than the “home” team, the North American church has had to reposition in a way to reach a changing cultural milieu. Theologian Richard Mouw says we’re in a missionary “location,” that North

America needs to be considered a mission field in the same way we once considered the underdeveloped world.³

When Daniel was pastoring in Montreal, Quebec, he experienced this reality firsthand. At one time in Quebec, the church was at the center. You see remnants of this history when looking at the giant cross atop Mount Royal in the heart of Montreal. You also see this when looking at the biggest church in Canada, Saint Joseph's Oratory, which was patterned after Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Today, though, if you were to visit Montreal, you would see churches that have now been repurposed as condos and town homes. In fact, if you were to listen to the French spoken on the streets, you would occasionally hear church words like *tabernacle*; the only difference is that they're using it as a swear word instead of in a theological conversation. Furthermore, if you were to visit Montreal today, you would occasionally bump into the older generation of Quebecois (people living in Quebec) who remember the dysfunction and abuse of the church when the church was in the center.

However, what's hopeful is that the younger generation does not remember a time when the church was at the center. They are not starting with a negative bias against Christianity. Instead, they are seeing Christianity on the same level playing field as Islam, Buddhism, or New Age. This has provided the church in Quebec a unique opportunity to start afresh and enter the city as missionaries. And based on the recent stories we've been hearing from Montreal and other areas in Quebec, we are excited and hopeful for the future where the church is on the periphery.

Although the end of Christendom presents an advantage to the church in that it allows the church to recognize the gospel is distinct from Western culture (that is, the gospel remains strong despite cultural changes), for many, this reposturing as a missionary after Christendom has proven to be difficult. The difficulty is that churches become too relevant (that is, too attractional) or irrelevant. By becoming too relevant, churches can stifle Christian growth. By continuing in irrelevance, churches will eventually die.

Some churches, although they mean well, overcontextualized their approach by focusing on attractional elements. Some would say that in becoming highly attraction-oriented bodies churches lose their transformational edge. I appreciate the fact that Willow Creek Community Church, known for its seeker-sensitive style of ministry, conducted a study a few years back that concluded it had been less successful at developing Christians toward maturity than they once thought.⁴ Consequently, to become a biblically faithful and fruitful church, they made shifts. And their experience is a reminder to all of us that offering culturally relevant services and needs-oriented ministry is not enough.

Other churches, in an effort to self-protect and preserve traditions and preferences, never attempt to change. I've said many times before that if the 1950s were to make a comeback all too many churches could go on without missing a beat. The good news is that the church found a strategy that worked; the bad news is that it worked thirty to fifty years ago. As a result of their unwillingness to change, churches lose touch with the community. Churches that lose touch with the community lose the heartbeat of God; without the heartbeat of God, churches will eventually flatline.⁵

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In order to strike a balance between irrelevance and superrelevance and to find a biblical and healthy posture, we must redevelop a missional foundation; we must move churches beyond a “come and see” mentality to more of a “go and be” as well as a “go and tell” one.

What Went Wrong?

The seismic shifts listed above are manifestations of how the church lost its missional focus. But how did the church lose its missional focus? Maybe a short look at church history will help answer that question. The church of Western European Christendom was once a church without mission.⁶ After the Reformation took hold in the sixteenth century, the evangelistic mission of the church was often neglected. Roman Catholics were energized by “new lands” to reach, but Protestants lost much of this missionary passion. This loss did not go unnoticed. Counter-Reformation Catholics pointed to the lack of missionary participation among Protestants as evidence of a defective Protestant movement.

This decline of missionary focus was evident in both Protestant belief systems and practice. Although the Reformation restored much of primitive Christianity, it also led to the loss of much—particularly in areas of mission. The consequences of this loss of missional focus continue today.

Actually, the nature of the Reformation church has been debated. Was it a missionary church? Did it value missions? These are valid questions with regard to whether the Reformation church engaged in the task of missions. They are, unfortunately, the wrong questions.

The Reformers were trapped within geographic Christendom while their Catholic counterparts were engaged in colonial expansion. Protestant “mission” became missions to Catholics.⁷ While Protestants focused on Catholics, Catholic missions flourished. So instead of asking, “Was the Reformation church a mission movement?” it's better to recognize that it was weak in its mission focus and ask, “Why?”

Pre-Reformation church confessional statements referred to the church as “one holy, apostolic church.” Words like these aren’t frequently found in the confessions of the Reformation. Instead, the Reformation confessions reacted to the errors of “apostolic succession” (the idea that the popes and bishops held their power because of being appointed by subsequent bishops/popes back to Peter) and omitted this phrase.

By deemphasizing the “apostolic” nature of church, the Reformers were trying to say the church did not derive its legitimacy from a succession of leaders. However, “apostolic” is more than a position; it’s a posture. Although the word is often misunderstood, the root of the word *apostle* is “one sent . . . with a message.” So we should be an *apostolic* church.

When the Reformers (and later evangelicals) started to deemphasize the apostolic nature of the church, they inadvertently lessened the sending nature of that apostolic church. The church that “reformed” lost touch with the God who sends, and the mission of the church suffered. According to Craig Van Gelder, “Lost in this deletion was an emphasis on the church’s ‘being authoritatively sent’ by God into the world to participate fully in God’s mission.”⁸

In losing its missional focus, the church lost its missional identity.

The Church’s Missional Identity

A century ago scholar Martin Kähler stated, “Mission is the mother of theology.”⁹ We believe that to live out a missional mandate the church must rediscover that part of its nature. The church will not play its proper role in the new missional movement until it understands the biblical and theological basis for such.¹⁰ God is a missionary God in this culture and in every culture. His nature does not change with location. Therefore, a missionary posture should be the normal expression of the church in all times and places.¹¹

The church needs to realize that mission is its fundamental identity.¹² A nonmissional church misrepresents the true nature of the church.¹³ As missiologist Wilbert Shenk points out: “The Great Commission institutionalizes mission as the *raison d’être*, the controlling norm, of the church. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of his body is to live a missionary experience in the world. There is no doubt that this was how the earliest Christians understood their calling.”¹⁴

Missionary identity is rooted in the triune and “sending” God. The fact that God is a sender is connected with the very existence of the church. The fact that Jesus was the “sent one” is his most fundamental identification.¹⁵ Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Because of our identity in Christ, we are to continue the mission of Jesus.¹⁶ “There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to

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the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world mission.”¹⁷

The concept of *missio Dei*, the mission of God, is recognition that God is a sending God, and the church is sent. In describing the “sentness” of the church, Tim Keller notes: “God does not merely send the church in mission. God already is in mission, and the church must join him. This also means, then, that the church does not simply have a missions department; it should wholly exist to be a mission.”¹⁸ The mission the church has been sent to join is the most important mission in the Scriptures.¹⁹ Jesus Christ embodied that mission; the Holy Spirit empowers for that mission; the church is the instrument of that mission; and the culture is the context in which that mission occurs.²⁰

Embracing a Missional Theology

As Daniel and I established in chapter 1, planting churches should be about planting missional churches. Planting missional churches stems from the fact that the church’s identity is wrapped up in God’s identity. Since God is a missional God, his church should be as well. This is essentially our foundational understanding for writing this book.

Having recovered a missional identity, many theologians, pastors, and churches are now in pursuit of creating a missional theology. While there has yet to be a consensus surrounding the definition of “missional theology,” the basic premise is founded on the question, What is the mission of the church, and how does the church fulfill its mission? From our understanding of the *missio Dei* and a biblical theology of kingdom, humanity, and mission, God’s people are to participate in the divine mission to manifest and advance God’s kingdom on earth through the means of sharing and showing the gospel of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ.

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God’s Mission Is for His Kingdom

The kingdom of God is central to a mission theology. From Genesis to Revelation, God is establishing his kingdom, which involves the whole creation. The kingdom design of God is on display in creation. He creates a place for his people and calls them to live life under his providential blessing and rule. Particularly at the beginning, he created Adam and Eve in his image and placed them in the garden to enjoy him, one another, and his blessings. He also gave them the mission to populate, cultivate, and exercise stewardship

over the earth. This was and continues to reflect the pattern of God's mission in the world.

The theme of God's kingdom could be expressed in this way: God's kingdom was *founded* in the garden, where there it was undermined; God's kingdom was *foreshadowed* in Israel, where God would be King over his people, which in the end they rejected; God's kingdom was *inaugurated* in Christ where Jesus is the rightful, just, merciful, gracious, redeeming King seeking to redeem a people from all peoples; God's kingdom is *reflected* within the Church, and as they live under the rule and reign of God, they act as signs and instruments of the kingdom; and God's kingdom will be *consummated* when Jesus makes all things new and establishes his rule and reign in the new city Jerusalem.

The Church Participates with Its King on Mission

Although the church isn't the kingdom, it is part of what theologians call the "already" but "not yet" kingdom. The church is the overt tool God uses to manifest his kingdom—and the coming consummated kingdom. And God's kingdom, the kingdom Jesus inaugurated and will one day consummate, is good news for all people for God intends to make one people from all peoples to live under his rule and reign. Thus, for the church to participate with Jesus on mission means they follow in his footsteps. As Jesus came saving, serving, and sending, his church moves forward in the world sharing, serving (or showing), and sending.

In living as kingdom citizens, the church shares the good news of Jesus—that he is the rightful King of the world who has come to redeem and restore every aspect of our lives as well as our world. As a result, the church serves, or shows, the effects and implications of this good news. Thus, God's kingdom is not just about evangelism, mercy, or justice; it is also about bringing all of life, every sphere of life, under his rule and reign. In other words, participation in King Jesus' mission takes the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37–39), and the "cultural mandate" (Gen 1:28) seriously. By sharing, serving/showing, and sending, the church becomes, according to theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, "the theater of the gospel" and "the place where the reconciliation achieved by the cross is to be played out in scenes large and small. The church is a company of players gathered together to stage scenes of the kingdom of God for the sake of a watching world."²¹

Understanding Missiological Thinking: Mission, Missions, and Missional

Laying a missional foundation for our church plants involves understanding the church’s missional identity and embracing a missional theology. In addition, it is also important to understand missiological thinking. We don’t want church plants to have a misinformed or incomplete understanding of *missional*. A church with a missions department or a church that takes a missions trip to Haiti every year may not fully be missional. These actions are simply part and parcel of what missional churches do. In order to bring clarity to missiological thinking—and continuing to lay a missional foundation—we think it is helpful here to remind you of the definitions of the following terms: *mission*, *missions*, and *missional*.

Mission. The word *mission* defines the intended goal or purpose. Christopher Wright refers to mission “as that which God has been purposing and accomplishing from eternity to eternity.”²² In addition, missiologist Lesslie Newbigin also commented that *mission* is an all-embracing term that refers to “the entire task for which the Church is sent into the world.”²³

Missions. The word *missions* relates to “mission” and refers to the pursuit of sharing and showing the gospel to all corners of the earth. Newbigin, in distinguishing between *mission* and *missions*, described missions (or foreign missions) as the intentional activities designed to create a Christian presence in places where there is no such presence, or at least no effective presence.²⁴ In a broad sense missions are the activities we undertake to accomplish mission.

Missional. While missional includes the above aspects, it means far more than “defining” mission or “doing” missions. *Missional* means adopting the *posture of a missionary*, joining Jesus on mission, and learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound. Think of it this way: *missional* means living and acting like a missionary without ever leaving your city. Based on these definitions, it’s important to note that a church, church plant, denomination, or network can have a mission and do missions without being missional.

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Integrating the Terms

The words above, although distinct, are inseparable. They are to be integrated within the culture of any church plant for that plant to be missional and to grow missional disciples.

Therefore, a missional church—one that has defined their mission, does missions, and is postured as a missionary—is “on mission.” Being *on mission*

includes that a church values what Jesus valued and thus is intentional and deliberate about reaching others. For example, *on-mission* Christians might look like these people: a woman who establishes a Bible study in her home for neighbors who are unchurched, a man who looks for natural opportunities to share Christ with coworkers, or a family who serves as foster parents in order to care for and nurture “orphans” in the love of Christ. Congregations that are *on mission* might be ones that partake in community events in order to establish contact and relationships with those who usually avoid church; participate in community projects in an effort to bless the city; or create a “third place” such as a coffee shop, child-care service, or a community center that provides a service for the community.

In reality, churches and individuals can be missional in many ways. The key for a church to be missional—to be “on mission”—is not about a church reworking its programs; it’s about the church rediscovering its mission. So to lead a church to be missional requires the planter to focus intently on the *missio Dei* (God’s mission), to be aware of what God is doing in the world and in the church’s local community, to join God in his work, and to teach the church to posture themselves as missionaries in the world.

Obstacles to a Missional Posture

We need new churches that are fresh expressions of the unchanging gospel. However, many things get in our way as we attempt faithfully to advance and express the good news of Jesus in our culture. As a result, these things become obstacles preventing us from being missional. Here are some of the more common obstacles that prevent churches (and believers) from having a missional posture.

Tunnel Vision—to the Extreme

One of the obstacles to a missional posture is tunnel vision. The missional theology we outlined earlier in this chapter included a wide view describing the mission of God’s people. For us the mission of God’s people is accomplished through both sharing and showing the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, some people hold to a more tunneled vision of mission. They either focus solely on evangelism or mercy (justice). In other words, they either focus on word or deed, not both.

Tim Keller agrees that churches that concentrate on either evangelism or justice are not comprehensive enough for a church to be missional. He writes: “The idea that ‘to be missional is to be evangelistic’ is too narrow. A missional church is not less than an evangelistic church, but it is much more.”²⁵ The other side to that statement is also true, “The idea that ‘to be missional is to

be involved in mercy ministries' is too narrow. A missional church is not less than a church seeking to do mercy, but it is much more."

Don't misunderstand: we believe the central mission of the church is the Great Commission. However, we don't believe it concludes the mission of the church. We believe the wide view, the scope, of God's mission in the world also includes acts of mercy or justice. In other words, the mission of God's people includes both word and deed. To focus on one and negate the other is to participate in a partial mission.

Tradition—to the Extreme.

For many people a vision for the future tends to involve revisiting an effective past experience. The difficulty seems obvious but often it's not. To which preferred past do we return? Do we return to the Reformation and use it as the touchstone of revival? Some seem to think so. Why wouldn't returning to the early church be a better option?

New churches have an opportunity that established churches often do not. They have the opportunity to contextualize the unchanging message of the gospel without any preexisting patterns to copy. They don't return to a romanticized past, but they incarnate the gospel in a biblical present. By holding on to personal traditions, rituals, and preferences, churches prevent themselves from sound, biblical, and missional contextualization.

The unmet challenge is to separate ourselves from any unnecessary and traditional cultural wrappings.²⁶ Many among conservative evangelical churches retreat to a preferred past in order to maintain a sense of spiritual nostalgia. Yet the church must never become too comfortable with any culture,²⁷ whether it existed five, fifty, or five hundred years ago. What the church must be comfortable with is becoming missional, always looking for the best way to reach the culture it lives in at that point in time. If anything, the church should err on the side of becoming futurists (rather than historians) in regard to culture. Staying biblically relevant means we'll have to look beyond the present to perceive what's best for the church in the future, moving forward in God's kingdom.

Technique—to the Extreme

Many writers criticize the church for its overemphasis on technique. Missiologist George Hunsberger claims that the greatest indicator of the inadequacy of our current missiology is its lack of theological depth.²⁸ Professor and church consultant Aubrey Malphurs says that an "accurate criticism of (the church growth) movement" is its overemphasis on the practical.²⁹

Craig Van Gelder, a former professor of congregational mission, explains:

The continued drift toward the development of large, independent community churches, with their focus on user-friendly, needs-oriented, market-driven models described by George Barna in *User Friendly Churches*, is in need of careful critique. While celebrating their contextual relevance, we need to be careful that we are committed in using these approaches to maintaining the integrity of both the gospel and the Christian community. These churches may just be the last version of the Christian success story within the collapsing paradigm of modernity and Christian-shaped culture.³⁰

Missions leader Paul McKaughan warns that, if we don't have a missional strategy driven by solid theological and ecclesiological principles, we simply perpetuate culture-driven models of church and mission.³¹

So the false hope of technique continues to undermine solid missiological thinking. Bottom line: many contemporary church planting and church-growth movements lack theological depth because they emphasize technique, paradigms, and methodologies rather than genuine biblical and missiological principles.

Denominations are attracted to such methodologies. Denominations and churches want growth. These techniques have produced results so they're often seen as solutions. It's not surprising that denominations and churches flounder under the influence of myths, unable to think missiologically in their setting.³² Pastors often look for the latest technique and fad to make their churches grow. Before, they ran to Southern California and came back with Hawaiian shirts and no socks—thinking that was what it took to engage their community. Then for a while they rushed off to venues with candles and incense, thinking this was the way to be relevant. What now? What will it be tomorrow?

The danger of techniques is that churches come to view them as the elements that make them missional when in all reality they are methods that replace the church's missional essence. Churches mistakenly conclude this because of their increasing attendance. Their trendy techniques cause a rapid rise in attendance, giving them a false sense that what they're doing is “working.” As a result, they may be more willing to throw discipleship out the window as a goal if that helps them retain more warm bodies in their services. That's a compromise a biblical missional church won't make.

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Ultimately our goal is much more than creating a large attendance; it's making disciples. Many church planters, especially those who depend heavily on technique, are afraid that by teaching theology they will be introducing subjects that won't interest seekers, thus driving them away. However, both statistically and anecdotally, we've found that a church that correctly applies the concept of true discipleship

will accomplish both goals: growth and depth. In fact, studies show that the higher the standards of biblical teaching, the longer people remain engaged. Today's seekers are seeking depth. They won't interrupt a fine Sunday morning of sleeping in to attend a church that serves up shallowness, at least not for long.

Developing a Missional Posture in Your Church

Daniel and I want you to be a missional planter and pastor who plants and leads a missional church. This chapter has been designed for you to think through developing a missional foundation. Now it's time to explore steps you can take to integrate this missional foundation into your church.

1. Understand God's mission and the gospel. Understanding the missional identity of the church, embracing a missional theology, and thinking missiologically are important steps in grasping God's mission. In addition, it's important to understand how the central figure of Scripture, Jesus, fits within the mission of God. If you fail to understand the connection between the good news of Jesus Christ and the mission of God, being effectively missional will be impossible. By having a firm grasp on God's mission and gospel, you're likely to have a loose grip on the obstacles and idols that prevent you and your church from being missional.

2. Identify obstacles and idols. As Paul walked around the city of Athens (Acts 17), he observed how religious the Athenians were by the idols they worshipped. These cultural idols, and especially the one to "an unknown god," became bridges by which Paul communicated the gospel and confronted their idol worship. By understanding the obstacles and idols of the culture, missional churches are able to build bridges to communicate the gospel message and confront those obstacles and idols.

3. Contextualize and communicate. We need to understand people in order to reach them. Acts indicates that Paul approached Jews and Gentiles differently. With the Jews, Paul reasoned about the saving role of the Messiah and his resurrection (Acts 17:1–4). With the Gentiles, Paul's reasoning was more foundational—addressing issues of resurrection, morality, and judgment (Acts 17:16–34). He engaged them based on where they were and what they knew.

4. Equip people for everyday mission. Brennan Manning once quipped, and dc Talk probably made famous: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."³³ Missional churches equip their people to live every area of their lives under the rule and reign of King Jesus. That means every sector and arena of their lives—spiritual, mental, emotional,

social, marital, familial, vocational, economical, and cultural realms—operate under the redeeming power of the gospel through the empowerment of the Spirit to reflect the glory of King Jesus.

5. Practice unity. Jesus, in his high priestly prayer, asked the Father, “I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in Me through their message. May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me” (John 17:20–21). The unity a church possesses must not only be practiced within a local body, but it must also extend to other local bodies. Cooperating and partnering with Christians outside your denominational tradition is a good thing—a Christ-honoring thing. As Augustine is most often quoted to have said, “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

While we will disagree on some things, we can agree with other Christians on many things. We evangelicals can have candid conversations—and cooperate—on things such as evangelism and community ministry. The truth is, we are all on the same team and interdependent on one another to reach our community, city, and world. Keller notes: “Unless you accept the fact that there is not one exclusively biblical church model, you will not see the need for strong fellowship and connections to other denominations and networks, which usually embody different emphases and strengths than the ones that characterize your model. . . . The city will not be won unless many different denominations become dynamic mini-movements.”³⁴

Conclusion

Many areas around the world desperately need a true spiritual awakening. This can come, in part, from planting new churches. Misinformed and fearful people will always resist what they do not understand. But without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission. The sending nature of God has not changed. He sends us to new and emerging cultures here in North America and around the world. We are most like Christ when we join him in the mission of reaching the unchurched by planting new churches.

Planting new churches is always risky, and many churches are unwilling to take those risks. Former professor Dean Gilliland observed that part of that risk involves contextualization:

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if ever there was one . . . the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor’s edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences. . . . Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of

forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct “another gospel which is not a gospel.”³⁵

The end goal, at least for our purposes, is to establish biblical new churches that are culturally relevant. If the church is willing to be missional and its theologians and thinkers are willing to assist in this process, the potential is unlimited. As the church rediscovers its missional nature, it will acquire a renewed passion to be a people *on mission*. Effective, missional, and biblically sound churches can be planted. These churches will engage the culture while remaining faithful to the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The result may look different to us but not to God. From his perspective the Word has become flesh in a new setting. Our churches will truly become missionaries in our communities.

Chapter 3

The Biblical Basis of Church Planting

Before planting a church, we start with the Bible to understand and build on the clear New Testament patterns of church planting. We'd be wrong to send out planters with organizational, strategic, and marketing tools but not the fundamental truths of God's Word and the principles of Scripture from which to work. The book of Acts is the most important book ever written on the subject. And the rest of the New Testament was written to new churches in their respective life situations, warts and all. In fact, the New Testament can be seen as an anthology of church plants!

Church planting—how did the New Testament churches do it, and how can we rediscover their passion? Amberson observes:

We, today, need to recapture the note of spontaneity which existed in the New Testament and, therefore, produced churches as the believers witnessed to the Lord Jesus Christ. Church planting does involve specific and deliberate intent to start new churches, but the New Testament points to the fact that new churches and church planting are the direct and inevitable consequences of believer's involvement in witnessing and proclamation.¹

The Four Commissionings of Jesus

To regain our passion, let's see how the early church responded to the commands of Jesus. We'll begin with the best known, the Great Commission, which many consider to be laying the foundation specifically for church planting by listing vital tasks assigned to congregations—making disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to obey. “Then Jesus came near and said to them, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have

commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18–20).

The earliest churches obeyed the Great Commission by planting new congregations to carry out the assignments of discipling, baptizing, and teaching that would begin the multiplication process of planting more and more churches. You notice that the process begins and ends with obedience. We can assume Jesus expected his listeners to evangelize and to gather the new believers into local congregations where they could be disciplined, baptized, and taught (in fact, we’ll make this case about church planting and the Great Commission more clearly in a later section). In the setting of the church, the process of the believers’ growth would occur. And then the cycle would repeat itself as the believers learned that obeying the Great Commission meant they, too, were to go out and disciple, baptize, and teach.

The Great Commission is one of Jesus’ four sending commands. In this chapter we’ll look at each one in greater depth.²

1. “I Am Sending You”

Each command provides details relating to the central tasks of discipling, baptizing, and teaching in a congregational setting. In John 20:21, Jesus explained, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). Since the Father had sent Jesus “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10), Jesus sends us with the same goal of the Father—to seek and to save the lost. For Christ followers this direction can’t be clearer. We are to pick up Jesus’ earthly work and continue doing it. It’s a personal message, and it applies to all of us.

For centuries many Protestant Christians believed Jesus’ commissions applied to only those disciples who actually heard his words. Church leaders proclaimed, “That was for the apostles. It doesn’t refer to us.” They failed to understand the implications of such a view. Obviously, Scripture addresses specific people in specific places; Jesus was in the company of his contemporaries when he spoke these words. But if we consider Bible study part of our Christian walk, then we understand the Bible to be a living document with relevance to God’s people through the ages. So Jesus’ words apply to the people he was addressing as well as to us and all believers. Like those people 2,000 years ago, we are called and sent by God to go wherever and for whatever purpose God chooses.

2. “Make Disciples of All Nations”

Two weeks following his commission in John 20, Jesus spoke the Great Commission, which was the second of the sending commands (Matt 28:18–20). The Great Commission in Matthew is Jesus’ best-known word of

sending, and it explains that the task of world evangelization is given to his disciples—then and now.

Using the phrase “all nations,” Jesus clearly intended for the gospel to reach lost people among what today missiologists call “people groups”; in fact, he intended for us to take the message to *every* people group and population segment. To understand this, church planters need to think less about political boundaries and more about the populations who live there.

**CHURCH
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If you take Canada as an example, you really do have *many* nations living there (Daniel knows firsthand because he’s Canadian!). For example, not only are there two official languages (English and French), but over 20 percent of the population was foreign-born according to a 2011 survey—the highest proportion among the nations that made up the G8 countries at the time.³ Furthermore, three-quarters of the foreign-born population in Canada were able to conduct a conversation in more than one language!⁴ Let’s look at how this plays out in greater detail.

Of the First Nations people are those who live on government land and those who have assimilated into towns and cities, perhaps barely recognizable from other people groups in their neighborhoods.⁵ Of the descendants of French settlers are those who speak only French and those who are bilingual. Of the Asians settling in areas like Vancouver are those who emigrated from different nations, like Korea and India, but those who are second-generation and subsequent generation immigrants may have never even visited Asia. And just to make things interesting, let’s look at the people of English descent and think of them in terms of lifestyles and interests—people who are just starting families, people who have retired from their occupations, people who farm, people who live in metropolitan areas, people who love music, people who love biking, people who have taken a liberal position on social issues. In this simple exercise about only Canada, we have come up with *many* “nations” Jesus commissioned us to reach—and, yes, he told us to reach them “all.”

How do we do this? Through *contextualization*. We recognize that different people groups and population segments have different values. God designed the gospel so the unchanging message can be put into changing “cultural containers” to reach people where they are and to take them where they need to go. All methods and worship must be centered on God and focused on the Bible. For missionaries in the Western world to effectively make disciples of all nations, they must learn and use the skill of contextualization.

Now let’s look closer at Jesus’ instructions to disciple, baptize, and teach. The Great Commission is church planting because Jesus called us to several

activities. The Great Commission is church planting first because it calls us to disciple. Discipleship is the task of the New Testament church. Discipleship is not happening properly when Christians must find their opportunities for spiritual growth outside the church. When a Christian says, “I can’t get discipleship at church; I must get it at home, online, or at conferences,” it’s likely the believer belongs to an unhealthy church (or the believer has an unhealthy view of discipleship and church). God expects the church to provide discipleship, which is not just a course or a series of studies. Discipleship centers on the salvation event; it begins with conversion and continues as an ongoing process. “Make disciples” means the church is to win people to Christ and grow these new converts in the faith. That process is meant to take place in the local church.

Second, the Great Commission is church planting because it calls the church to, among other things, baptize. Baptism is an ordinance of the local church. Baptism takes place in or among the local church. I say “among” because it does not have to take place in a church building. Many planters have baptized in bathtubs, lakes, swimming pools, and hot tubs. Baptism takes place wherever we can gather the church and wherever there’s enough water to perform the ordinance. The Greek word *baptizo* means “ongoing baptizing,” immersing each new believer. The Great Commission is given to the local church, and baptism is a local church ordinance with local church responsibilities.

Third, the Great Commission is church planting because it instructs the church to teach. We observe the fulfillment of this command to teach in Acts 2:42: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,” which was the basis for their growth and fellowship. The Great Commission is fulfilled in churches by teaching biblical precepts and by planting new churches that continue teaching those precepts.

Some people note that the Great Commission does not use the term *church planting*. Thus, they argue that the Great Commission is fulfilled only through existing congregations (particularly in highly church-ed areas). But the best indication of what Jesus meant can be found in how his first hearers responded. The early church was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9), and these Spirit-filled disciples planted churches. It’s obvious by their actions that the first hearers of the Great Commission assumed its fulfillment required multiplying disciples and forming new congregations. The first believers heard the Commission, left their homes, and went out to make disciples and plant churches. When we hear the Great Commission, we should also be motivated to go out and plant new congregations. We should follow the example of the early church.

3. “Preach Repentance and Forgiveness”

Just before his ascension Jesus again reminded the disciples of their task. The third command describes the content and location of their proclamation: “Repentance for forgiveness of sins . . . to all the nations” (Luke 24:47). Nonbelievers can know Jesus only through repentance and forgiveness, the message every genuine messenger of the gospel must proclaim. But this command also contained Jesus’ instruction for the disciples to wait until they had received the power of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. Jesus, the resurrected Lord, commanded them (and us) to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. This is the content of the commission.

Church planting and church growth are rightfully subject to criticism when the content of the message is not Christ and Christ crucified, when the preaching is more opinion than proclamation of God’s Word. On the other hand, many criticize any innovation, so I caution people who “have heard” or who “think” a certain church is not preaching the gospel to go and find out for themselves. It may turn out to be hearsay, not heresy. It may even turn out to be a misunderstanding based on style.

I have planted contemporary, innovative churches that reached unchurched people with the good news and discipled believers. We achieved success by using creative methods. Criticism followed. But we determined that one particular criticism would never be true of us—that we preached anything other than Christ.

The message of church planters should never be anything other than the Word of God. Jesus expressed this axiom when he, as the crucified and resurrected Messiah, said to “preach repentance and forgiveness.” Regardless of how seeker sensitive we wish to be, we can never justifiably remove what for some nonbelievers is the stumbling block of the cross.

The most biblical church is the one in which the cross is the only stumbling block for the unchurched. That’s because lost people should face no church-culture stumbling blocks (such as a noncontextual worship style) that keep them from Christ. Lost people need no additional reasons to stay away from church. The unchurched need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and that includes the stumbling block of the cross. Planters must not present any message other than Christ, and they should present it in a style that’s culturally appropriate to the hearers.

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4. “Jerusalem . . . to the Ends of the Earth”

The final sending passage from Jesus provides the geography. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Today we think of these geographic locations as concentric circles spreading from “our Jerusalem” or community. Judea may be seen as our state or province and Samaria as our continent (or more accurately, a different culture living in and near our Judea). This is helpful if we want to teach our congregations that missionary work is not all overseas but right here at home, too. For many that’s a radical concept. Yet it’s true, and it’s biblical, based on Acts 1:8.

Another lesson from this passage is that the power Jesus promised in the sending account in Luke 24 appears here. When the Holy Spirit is present, disciples—then and now—are empowered to spread the gospel with confidence locally, regionally, and globally. Jesus was the content of the message (as Paul described it in 1 Cor 1:23, only Christ and Christ crucified), and he promised the power to proclaim his name.

Early believers were sent (as we are) for the same purpose for which Jesus was sent: to disciple all people groups by seeking and saving the lost—both locally and around the world. New Testament Christians acted out these commands as any spiritually healthy, obedient believers would: they planted more New Testament churches. The Great Commission instructs us to do the same.

The sending God sent the Son. We join him in his mission of seeking and saving the lost. We are to be God’s sent people to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness in the power of the Holy Spirit both locally and worldwide to all people groups.

New Testament Patterns

**CHURCH
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OF GOD.**

While differences exist in the way churches were planted in the New Testament, this section will demonstrate patterns of church planting used throughout the New Testament. Church planting convictions and endeavors should begin with the heart of God. Luke 19:10 states that Jesus came “to seek and to save the lost.” In focusing on unchurched persons, we align our lives with Jesus, who modeled and claimed, “Those who are well don’t need a doctor, but the sick do need one. I didn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Many churches seem to have “called the righteous” more than the unrighteous with better teaching and more programs. Advertising claims

of “programs for the whole family” and “quality Bible teaching” seem more designed to attract members from other churches. But Jesus claimed that he had come to call outcasts rather than the righteous. Like Jesus, the planter must seek the unchurched. In fact, through Luke’s trilogy of parables (chap. 15) about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, Jesus underscored the importance of seeking those who are lost in order to share God’s good news with them.

All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to Him. And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So He told them this parable: “What man among you, who has 100 sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don’t need repentance.

“Or what woman who has 10 silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls her women friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost!’ I tell you, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:1–10)

The angels’ response indicates the importance of conversion. Jesus promises in Luke 15:7, “I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don’t need repentance.” Following the parable of the coin, he continues, “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10 NASB). Although Jesus’ words ending the parable of the prodigal son are attributed to the father in the story, the father clearly is a symbol for God. In the story the father pleads with his “righteous son” to “celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:32).

Luke’s Gospel certainly emphasizes heaven’s joy at the conversion of lost ones. Luke continues this theme in Acts 15:3 with his reference to the early church’s joy over the conversion of lost sinners when Paul reported his success among the Gentiles: “When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, explaining in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they created great joy among all the brothers.”

The New Testament Planter

Through the ministry of the apostle Paul, the New Testament provides a great example of the way we can minister to unchurched persons. Paul invited the recipients of his letters to “imitate me, as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). What did Paul do that was worthy of imitation? What did he want his readers, including us, to imitate? Identifying the values and actions of Paul can enrich the ministry of every modern-day church planter. Take a look at this outline created by John Worcester.

Paul the Planter⁶

1. Paul was personally prepared for his church planting ministry.
 - His world-class formal training gave him a broad understanding of divine history (Acts 22:3).
 - He was vitally connected with God (2 Cor 12:9).
 - He became prepared by stepping out in ministry from the start (Acts 9:20–22).
 - He was teachable. He apprenticed under Barnabas. He was willing to be under authority before God put him over others (Acts 11:25–26).
 - He lived an exemplary life (1 Thess 2:1–12).
2. Paul was an evangelist.
 - He began preaching the gospel right after conversion (Acts 9:19–22).
 - He was a net fisherman in two ways: he led whole families to Christ (Acts 16:25–33), and he conducted large-group evangelistic meetings (Acts 13:44; 14:1; 19:9–10).
 - He looked for those who were most receptive (Acts 18:6).
3. Paul was an entrepreneurial leader.
 - He had a vision and call from God (Acts 9:15; 26:16–18).
 - His vision was to lead missionary teams into new territories to plant churches (Rom 15:20–23).
 - He selected the workers and apprentices he wanted on his team. He was not afraid to ask others to make sacrifices for the cause of Christ (Acts 16:2–3). Sometimes he would not let people on his team (Acts 15:38). Paul also appointed long-term leaders for the churches he started (Acts 14:23). He even gave direction to his teammates as to where they should minister (Acts 18:19; 19:22).
 - He received direction from God as to where his team should plant, and his teammates had confidence in his decisions (Acts 16:6–10).
 - He was a proactive strategist (Acts 13:14, 44–49). He established a reproducible pattern for his church planting (Acts 14:1; 17:2).
 - He deliberately did advanced planning (Acts 19:21).

4. Paul was a team player.
 - He was willing to be on a team (Acts 13:1–5).
 - He always planted with a team (Acts 15:40; 16:6; 20:4).
 - He had a sending base church to which he reported (Acts 14:26–28).
5. Paul was a flexible, risk-taking pioneer (1 Cor 9:19–21).
 - He constantly penetrated new territory (Rom 15:20).
 - He targeted a new group (Rom 11:1–14).
 - He pioneered new methods of ministry (Acts 13).
6. Paul cared for people (shepherd role).
 - He invested personally in the lives of people (Acts 20:17–21, 31).
 - He was like a nursing mother and an encouraging father (1 Thess 2:7–11).
 - He was vitally concerned with the growth and development of converts (Acts 14:22).
 - He drew close to coworkers (2 Tim 1:2).
7. Paul empowered others (equipper role).
 - In order to lead this rapidly growing movement of Christianity, he risked delegation to young Christians (Acts 16:1–3).
 - His team planted churches on their first missionary journey and then a few months later came back to these new churches and appointed elders (Acts 13:13; 14:21–23).
 - He recognized his own strengths and weaknesses and delegated to others according to their strengths (Titus 1:5).
8. Paul stayed committed to fulfilling God's calling and vision even at the cost of extreme personal sacrifice (Acts 14:19–20; 2 Cor 11:23–28).
 - He never backed down, and he never gave up.
 - He maintained a thankful attitude in the face of cruel and unfair treatment (Acts 16:25).
9. Paul was willing to let go of his church plants and move on to plant more (Acts 16:40).
 - Paul needed special encouragement to stay in a city for long (Acts 18:9–11).
 - The longest he ever stayed in any one place was three years (Acts 20:31).
 - Ephesus was possibly his strongest plant and our best model (Acts 19:10).
 - He had faith in God's ability to keep the churches he started strong (Acts 20:32).

- He was willing to let his best teammates leave his team in order to benefit best the kingdom of God (Acts 17:14).
- He followed the example of Barnabas, who was willing to let go of the top position on the church planting team (Acts 13:6–12).
- He modeled the church at Antioch that was willing to let go of its top leaders (Acts 13:1–4).

CHURCH PLANTING, THOUGH PROFOUNDLY ENTREPRENEURIAL, IS NOT A SOLITARY EFFORT; CHURCH PLANTING MUST BE A PARTNERSHIP.

A couple of points bear repeating. One component of Paul's example worthy of our imitation was his entrepreneurial personality. An entrepreneur starts new ventures from scratch. The fact that Paul was entrepreneurial is central to understanding his church planting ministry. Effective church planters always demonstrate entrepreneurial leadership skills. As an entrepreneur Paul was always thinking of new ways to evangelize and new areas to enter. We'll delve deeper into entrepreneurial leadership later in this book.

A second trait worthy of imitation was Paul's desire to remain a team player. Maintaining the balance between being an entrepreneur and being a team player challenges many contemporary planters. These two traits fit together poorly unless the Holy Spirit is allowed to guide an entrepreneurial planter to be a team player. Church planting, though profoundly entrepreneurial, is not a solitary effort; church planting must be a partnership.

Finally, Paul instructed others to follow the model he presented. For us to follow that model, we need to understand his strategy and his passion. Paul always asked, "How can I best reach unbelievers?" To reach them he was willing to pay any price and change any methodology short of compromising the gospel. This willingness included the risk taking of entrepreneurship and the accountability of partnership. Such traits are worthy of our imitation.

New Testament Church Planting

Church planting appears not only in the life of Paul but also throughout the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts. Indeed, Acts becomes a remarkable document when read with an eye toward church planting. Take a look at the outline below through the lens of a church planter created by John Mark Terry.⁷

Church Planting in the Book of Acts

- I. Church Planting in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)
 - A. Its Origin
 1. Born in prayer (1:12–14)
 2. Bathed in the Spirit (2:1–4)

3. Begun with proclamation (2:14–39)
4. Baptized in the name of Jesus (2:41)
- B. Its Functions
 1. Doctrinal teaching (2:42)
 2. Fellowship (2:42)
 3. Worship (2:42–43, 46–47)
 4. Prayer (2:42; 4:29–31)
 5. Benevolence (2:44–45; 4:34–35)
 6. Identification with the community (2:47)
 7. Witness (4:33; 5:42)
- C. Its Growth
 1. Three thousand baptized at Pentecost (2:41)
 2. People saved daily (2:47)
 3. Two thousand saved on Solomon's Portico (4:4)
 4. Multitudes added (5:14)
 5. Priests and others believe (6:7)
- D. Its Organization
 1. Apostles (6:2)
 2. Deacons (6:3)
 3. Congregation (6:5)
 4. Elders (15:6, 22)
- II. Church Planting in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)
 - A. Church planting done by laity (8:1, 4)
 - B. Mass evangelism (8:5–6, 12)
 - C. Village evangelism (8:25)
 - D. Churches multiplied (9:31)
 - E. Growth enhanced by miracles (9:32–42)
 - F. Salvation extended to Gentiles (10:44–48)
- III. Church Planting in the World (Acts 11–28)
 - A. Scattered laity started Jewish churches (11:19)
 - B. Christians from Jerusalem plant Gentile-Jewish church in Antioch (11:20–21)
 - C. Antioch became the great missionary church
 1. Sensitive to the Holy Spirit (13:2)
 2. Submissive to the Spirit (13:3)
 3. Sending church (13:3)
 - D. Paul's first missionary journey (13–14)
 1. Preached first in synagogues (13:5; 14:1)
 2. Moved from city to city (13:13–14)
 3. Shifted to the Gentiles (13:46)
 4. Returned to check on the new churches (14:21)
 5. Appointed elders to lead the churches (14:23)

- E. Paul's second missionary journey (15:40–18:22)
 - 1. Employed a team ministry (15:40)
 - 2. Returned to visit new churches (15:41)
 - 3. Guided by the Holy Spirit (16:9–10)
 - 4. Evangelized households (16:15, 33)
 - 5. Taught in the marketplace (17:17)
 - 6. Contextualized the message (17:22–23)
 - 7. Emphasized responsive peoples (18:6)
- F. Paul's third missionary journey (18:23–21:17)
 - 1. Returned to visit the churches (18:23)
 - 2. Established mother churches in urban areas (19:10; 1 Thess 1:8)
 - 3. Started house churches (20:20)
 - 4. Encouraged stewardship in new churches (1 Cor 16:1–3)

Church planting began in Jerusalem. Acts 1–7 describes the founding, growth, and early challenges of the Jerusalem church. The church was born in prayer (1:12–14), immersed in the Spirit (2:1–4), and bathed in the miraculous (2:5–13). God brought about a powerful ministry in Jerusalem, the center of the earliest church. It did not take long for the “found” of the church (the believers) to preach the Word to the lost.

A study of Acts reveals that laypersons affected early church planting (8:1, 4). They performed mass evangelism (8:5–6, 12) as well as village evangelism (8:25). Through this lay movement churches multiplied (9:31). Miracles enhanced the growth of the church (9:35–42), and salvation reached increasing numbers of Gentiles (10:44–48). Later lay Christians from Jerusalem witnessed about Christ and planted a Gentile-Jewish church in Antioch (Acts 11:20–21).

The founding of the Antioch church may be the most important moment in church planting history. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the Antioch church became the first great missionary-sending church (Acts 13:3), and they sent missionaries throughout the world. On the other hand, the Jerusalem church turned increasingly inward and lost much of its vision, finally disappearing like the Judaizers of the early Christian movement.⁸ In contrast the Antioch congregation reached the world by becoming the first church planting church!

Few church planters have been blessed by the support of an Antioch congregation, a church that willingly sponsors new churches. Few churches volunteer, as Antioch did, to send the best of their leaders and to contribute significant amounts of money for the establishment of new congregations. The Antioch church did just these things.

When Tim Keller planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1989, his vision was for it to be a modern Antioch church. He wanted

to “apply the gospel to New York City so as to change it spiritually, socially, culturally and, through it, to change our society and the world. His vision was more than to plant a church that would be a seedbed for other churches. He wanted to see the gospel applied in such a way that it would transform a city.”⁹ As a result of their commitment, as of 2015, they have helped start 300 churches in forty-five cities.¹⁰ For the enduring success of church starting, planters need more Antioch churches to provide support.

Acts records that the church at Antioch sent Paul on his first missionary journey (chaps. 13–14). He began by preaching the good news of Jesus Christ in Jewish synagogues (13:5; 14:1) to receptive and responsive people. Synagogues existed in almost every major community in the Roman Empire. Smaller communities hosted places of prayer where no synagogue had yet been established. Paul approached these people whom he hoped to be receptive and responsive, telling them the good news of Jesus Christ.

Eventually, as Jews became more resistant to this approach, Paul began to emphasize reaching Gentiles (Acts 13:44–47). He began with God fearers. These were Gentiles who demonstrated a hunger for true spirituality and authentic religion, and they worshipped with the Jews in their community synagogues. Although these seeker Gentiles could not become full members of a synagogue without undergoing the initiation rite of circumcision, they desired to worship the one true God of the Jews. Paul’s move toward the more receptive Gentiles began with the God fearers. To the Gentiles the gospel (without circumcision) was good news indeed.¹¹

During Paul’s second missionary journey (15:40–18:22), he began to focus on contextualization. Much like many in our world today, the citizens of Athens were people in search of spiritual truth. At Mars Hill in Athens, a city full of idols, Paul took the revolutionary step of starting where the people were: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect” (Acts 17:22). Beginning at the point of their search, Paul provided them with a reasoned witness about the truth of Christ.

In the past few decades, the West has experienced a clear cultural shift. One of its attributes is “spirituality,” although it is expressed in ways foreign to most evangelical Christians. Church planters who immerse themselves in the new culture without being bound by traditional church patterns but still committed to the Scriptures will be the best change agents. New churches are contextualizing as Paul did. This enables them to reach this new cultural expression, understanding that emerging “spirituality” lacks the truth of the Word and the Holy Spirit.

On his third missionary journey (18:23–21:17), the apostle returned to the churches he had founded earlier (18:23). He also established strategic mother churches in major cities (Acts 19:10; 1 Thess 1:8). These

congregations would later become sending churches in their own right. The Philippian emissary, Epaphroditus, serves as a perfect example of a major city church sending its own to serve, and probably to become an evangelist, in this case, alongside Paul (see Phil 2:25–30; 4:18). Paul even encouraged stewardship in these new churches (1 Cor 16:1–3; 2 Cor 8:1–6; 9:1–5) so they could become self-supporting and reproducing, learning to serve others. Paul was concerned that these churches avoid developing external dependency on other congregations.

Conclusion

The accounts and details we've considered in Acts demonstrate that Paul and other early Christians believed in and practiced church planting as a normal part of their lives—and specifically in response to the commands of Jesus. Planting new churches was not a novel or unique concept for zealous believers. Rather, church starting was the normal expression of New Testament *missiology*. Intentional church planting, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was the method of the early churches. Church planting explains how the early church exploded across the Roman Empire during the decades following the resurrection of Jesus.

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The life of Paul and the action of the early church demonstrate that church planting was a primary activity. Any church wishing to rediscover the dynamic nature of the early church should consider planting new churches. Furthermore, the means Paul and the early church used provide principles for us to apply in our current methodology. Though many of their strategies were specific to their context, we should find their principles universally applicable.



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