

WHY WE PLANT CHURCHES

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As Jesus looks out on the Galilean countryside in Matthew 9, his concerns and actions reveal a primary reason why we should plant new churches. In verse 36, as the Lord of Glory sees the multitudes, he is moved with compassion for them because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

That statement takes us on a journey through Scripture. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1), says King David of his God. The Lord says to Ezekiel, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel.... The shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock.... Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand.... Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.... I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down” (Ezek. 34:1-16). In his compassion for his sheep, Jesus tells his disciples to pray for those who will go out and labor among them: “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38).

So it should not surprise us that when Jesus restores Peter to himself after his resurrection, he charges him, “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). And when Paul gathers the elders of the church at Ephesus down by the seacoast at Miletus, he charges them “to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Similarly, when an aging Peter pens his challenge to the elders who care for the suffering believers scattered among the churches of Asia Minor, he urges them, “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2).

Why is there all this talk in the Bible about shepherds and elders? Because it was the plan of God from before the foundation of the world that in this age of the harvest it would be through the establishment of churches that sheep would be brought into proximity to shepherds—elders who would care for them. We must never forget that our impetus for planting new churches is not the enlargement of our denomination, but the care for the ever-increasing flock of God’s elect. We must go into the highways and byways to bring godly elders ever closer to the harvest of the lost, the misled, and the underfed. That is God’s plan for how they will be cared for. But how do we go about that?

THREE REASONS FOR STARTING CHURCHES

One of the most basic questions asked of anyone involved in church planting is, “Why are you starting a new church?” Implied is the question, “Aren’t there enough churches here already?” It is neither biblically correct nor wise to answer, “Because these folks can’t get along with others in their present congregation,” or, “Because they just don’t like the other churches in town.” It is even hard to find biblical justification for saying, “Since there is no Orthodox Presbyterian church here, we should start one.” There are, however, at least three biblical rationales for starting new churches, and they can help to clarify and direct our church-planting efforts.

1. There is a special opportunity to plant this church in this place at this time.

The founding of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26) is an example of this reasoning. The rapid influx of a large number of believers into that city and their effective ministry to Gentiles made it obvious that a new church should be planted in Antioch. In Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), on Paul’s second missionary journey, the circumstances were very different, but the reasoning was the same. The response to the gospel led to the planting of a new church of which Paul could later say, “You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.... Your faith in God has become known everywhere” (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

So when a large number of believers move into a distant community, or when conversions begin to be the result of a Bible study sponsored by a local church in another town, there is biblical reason for concluding that there may be a special need for this church in this place at this time.

2. This center of population and influence needs the ministry of the new church we will plant.

Philippi is identified in the Scriptures as “a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12). For some reason, the Holy Spirit made a specific point of commenting on the stature of a city in which the planting of a new church was about to take place. It is appropriate to conclude (1) that leading population centers are important places at which we should look as we lay plans to plant new churches, and (2) that the design of this kind of church planting is to bring the influence of the gospel to bear on the whole cultural framework of the area. The church in Philippi served as an important source of support for Paul’s church-planting ministry (see Phil. 4:15-16), and it was to that church that Paul could write from another leading city to tell them that he was chained

as a prisoner for Christ and that the palace guard and everyone else in Rome knew of it.

It should be pointed out, however, that not every population center is automatically a church-planting target. Paul preached a powerful message in Athens, but the Scriptures record no beginning of a church in that city through his ministry. Thus, we may deduce that there is nothing that makes the planting of a church in a center of population inherently advantageous, nor is the opportunity for growth or greater effectiveness of ministry enhanced by the size of the population of the community in which it is established. But where centers of population and influence exist throughout the United States and Canada, there is reason to conclude that perhaps we should focus our church-planting efforts there.

3. These fellow believers need our help to carry on what Christ has begun among them.

The churches in Corinth (Acts 18:2) and Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7) both had small groups of believers in place before Paul came to town. A single family (Aquila and Priscilla) became the nucleus for the founding of the church at Corinth. Twelve men (and presumably their families) who knew and followed only the teachings of John the Baptist formed the core group of what eventually became the strong and vital church at Ephesus, which would later be pastored by Timothy. Both of these churches seem to have been planted because wise elders recognized a compelling obligation to help fellow believers carry on what Christ had begun among them. Similar circumstances have presented themselves to us over the years, and a number of churches in the OPC today were planted when pastors and presbyteries came to the aid of fellow believers in distant communities where Christ was obviously building his church.

HOW DO WE START OUT?

But, having decided that we have a good and proper reason for planting a new church, how ought we to go about the task? We think highly of the idea of using core groups as a method of starting new churches. Paul gathered such groups wherever he went. And by so doing he seems to be showing us a Biblical church planting methodology. “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2). The Apostle Paul made it a standard practice to start his ministry in a new place with a visit to the local Jewish synagogue, where God was worshiped and His Word was honored. Follow him through his first three missionary journeys (Acts 13-20) from

Cyprus all the way around to Ephesus, and this standard method of operation may be observed in all of his church planting efforts.

So according to Paul's custom, he went first to those who would know about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He went to those who honored God's Word, knew the character and joy of worship, and looked for the coming of the Christ. He proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and invited them to study the Scriptures with him. In the process, Paul showed us a time-honored way of planting new churches: he formed core groups of believers who knew God and His Word in every town he visited. These core groups formed the worshiping and discipling nuclei for reaching the lost. It is difficult to know the exact equivalent of "going first to the synagogue" as new churches are planted today. But it appears likely that it has to do with beginning them with groups of people who are grounded in God's Word and who are ready to form new worshiping covenant communities.

Jesus said, "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35). He was signaling the dawn of a new age in redemptive history, the age of the harvest. So, as the pages of the history of the postapostolic church unfold, one generation's foreign missions becomes the next generation's home missions. And we understand ourselves to be the harvesters as we bring godly shepherds in ever closer proximity to his lost and needy sheep.

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