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Beginning a New Church

Whether we are reading Scripture from the apostle Paul, the writings of Augustine or Luther, the sermons and instructions of Tauler or Spener, or the treatises of Warfield and Murray, the message is the same. The church is constantly subject to delusion and confusion. It needs skill, provided principally by its leadership, to reevaluate regularly its ministry efforts in light of the New Testament model.

Yet the subject of establishment of a new church, or church planting, most often is found in mission's manuals. But the starting point for instructions on church planting is not through the school of missions but the discipline of biblical theology. For it is in theology and exegesis that we find our church planting bearings: in understanding the teachings of Christ to His disciples and in coupling the events of church growth in Acts with the ecclesiology of the epistles. Then, by understanding the character and mandates for the church, we are ready to evaluate that ministry process as it extends into communities where churches are needed.

Thus, steering a course that admittedly severs us from the moorings of convenience and convention, we launch into the subject of church planting—New Testament style.

WHERE DO WE START?

Determining a starting point for a new church is no easy matter. Some would say, “The need is in foreign fields. The vast majority of Christian ministry is in America; thus we are to be looking overseas.” There is merit to that observation. We have already observed that the mandate of Matthew 28, called the Great Commission, presents the believer with a “going” posture with compassion for those who have not heard. This cannot be taken lightly.

Yet we had a saying in seminary: “If you go where there is need, you’ll end up going everywhere.” It is also true that there is a significant need for rethinking ministry here at home—in the context of neighborhoods and communities that have multiple religious activities and organizations, but still are much in need of consideration “in the inward travail of soul which the claims of truth demand.” The task of spreading the truths that provide for proper conduct in the church remains to be applied with full energy to every tribe and country where opportunity exists.

FOUR CASE STUDIES

In the last ten years John has had the privilege of participating in the initial efforts and/or leadership of four local assemblies: two in Texas and two in Oregon. In each work he has learned new lessons, struggled with new challenges, and made his share of mistakes. But in each he has seen by the grace of the Lord the principles emphasized in this book bring spiritual growth and fruit. All four works today are ministering effectively in their communities.

In the first two churches in Texas, John was as much of an observer as a participant in the leadership process. He and his wife had the joy of teaching a small group of believers for about two years before they moved to Oregon. It was first in the sharing of life and experience with those believers and those churches that they

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began to reevaluate what is to be the posture and priorities of a New Testament church.

After their move to Portland, they again became acquainted with a number of families who had similar desires. After a number of meetings and prayer sessions they started meeting in January 1977 in the gymnasium of a school. After one year the assembly moved its location, through merger with another small body of believers, to the current building where today the assembly still meets and fellowships together.

Their latest church planting effort began in fall 1980, recognizing a need for an assembly closer to their community. Having moved into the country, they requested from the Portland assembly permission to bring a leadership team, themselves included, and interested members living near them into their community for the starting of this new church. The current church began through house meetings and then continued as they again found themselves in the rented facilities of a public school.

The different matters under consideration in this chapter will be considered and illustrated in light of these new churches, which we hope will give more definite ideas for consideration in similar efforts. It might be that more light will come from our failures than from any successes that the Lord has given.

THE DILEMMA OF LOCATION

When considering starting a church in a community where evangelical churches already exist, the first step should never be the assumption that the community needs a new church. We must, rather, carefully evaluate and work with the believers and leadership of the established church bodies, attempting to bring renewal to them first. It is only after it becomes apparent that the community needs the ministry of a new church body—and this conviction is confirmed by other mature counsel—the plans and prayers can be

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made toward this end. We suggest the following advice: a person's commitment to a local church body should be firm and unswerving until the consistent practices of that assembly bring an individual believer's conscience into conflict with the truths of the New Testament concerning church ministry. Commitment to a church family is no light matter. Changes should be made only after careful thought and sincere prayer. Further, we feel an obligation to seek the discernment of pastors and leadership of existing churches in the community. We have yet to have a pastor discourage this kind of effort. If that had happened, we would have had to consider his concerns carefully.

Assuming that there is legitimate need for a new church in the community and that there is a consensus of leadership and families concerned with the ministry, then house meetings can begin. We recommend regular Sunday meetings while also developing the friendships and relationships through small groups. It is the norm to consider smallness a liability. In practice that just is not true; smallness is an advantage. It is only in the context of small groups and individual relationships that we can begin to know and love one another in the body of believers. Almost without exception, the first meetings in a home offer some of the best memories of ministry and fellowship for the families working in the initial planting effort. For some groups, the house church becomes the best, and final, answer to a community's need. If so, do not apologize for size of ministry.

We have also found that as the church grows in numbers, it may become necessary to arrange for rented public facilities. There are a number of reasons for that. First, it is not long before a typical home cannot facilitate the numerical needs of the church. Second, a public building allows a "neutral" setting for new members to consider the ministries of the assembly. Third, the facility brings in more leaders to guide the church and cultivate the lives of its young men for future leadership. Fourth, the building helps establish a core of believers who begin to make priorities in ministry that will lead to daughter

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works in adjacent communities and missions efforts overseas. The New Testament church was a blend of house churches and larger city churches, which combined the advantages of small group and larger group meetings (see chapter 7).

THE DEARTH OF LEADERSHIP

The first major challenge faced by the new church is the need for strong leadership. There are practical as well as technical reasons that is true. Practically, the needs of even a small group multiply quickly, and shepherds are needed to begin allocating substantial time to the needs of the church. Yet the abilities of a small group to financially support this shepherd, to some degree, are limited.

As well, there is a technical question of importance. In the New Testament we do not find men who ordain themselves. There is always a mother church and leadership from that church, or from the apostles, who set those men apart as elders to serve the needs of the assembly. But often for a new church there is not that sending or setting-apart agency. That awkwardness should not be minimized. Solutions are found, in part, in the ordained and confirmed resident or community Christian leadership—whether or not they are mother-church related.

Money matters. Given those initial concerns, the principal problems of leadership for a new church are in matters of support and ministry style. There are initial questions of whether leadership can, or should, be supported. Some believers will want missions to be the budget priority; others a building program. We always found sufficient challenge in paying the rent on a public facility. Money and ministry needs some clarification.

In the New Testament two principal groups were regularly supported. One group is familiar; the other is practically unknown. Both are seen in 1 Timothy 5:16-18:

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If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need. The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

Surprised? The New Testament church recognized by the time of the writing of this epistle the need to support two groups in the church: elders and qualified widows.

Concerning the widows, there are specific criteria. She must be clearly in need; without family who can help; aged; and a history of ministry in her community that is known by the church. The church has almost totally failed in that area. We have disregarded the needs and ministry contributions of our older saints. That pattern must be reversed if the household of God is to grow and prosper as it should.

The church was also to recognize the need to support its leaders. First Timothy 5:17 gave us some important guidelines (see chapter 8). Although all elders in an assembly are equal, the church is to recognize the need for, as much as possible, designating remuneration for elders who work hard at their ministries. Some leaders can function as staff resource elders who, being qualified due to their diligence, serve full-time because of the financial support of the church. Remember that these men are also shepherds and that they do not replace the other shepherds. All elders pastor the flock.

At one time in the Portland church, there were twelve elders, or pastors. Of the twelve, six men supported themselves in jobs and careers, three worked full-time, and the remaining three received part-time compensation in relation to diligence and need. But all twelve men had small-group responsibilities, since each elder is responsible for shepherding. In a different situation the distribution

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of ministry responsibilities could be spread differently between full-time, part-time, or non-compensated elders in the body.

These considerations bring up the related matter of compensation for men in vocational Christian ministries. In an extended section of Scripture from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes:

If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it (1 Cor. 9:11-18).

Notice the two equally valid principles that Paul carefully weaves through the text. The first principle of ministry support is that “the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14). Using the words of Christ, instruction from the Old Testament, and illustrations of the farm, Paul reminds the believers that men who labor in the ministry can reasonably expect to be supported by the ministry.

The second principle is equally clear. Paul was very concerned

that the motives of a shepherd be above reproach. He chose not to receive support from those to whom he ministered. “But we did not use this right....What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so make use of my rights in preaching it” (1 Cor. 9:12b, 18). Although there are reasonable rights for ministry support for men who labor in the ministry, it is equally legitimate to elect not to receive those funds. John has served with elders who gave both part- and full-time service to the church without compensation available to them. Of course, any funds not used for leadership support, for whatever reasons, can then be used in other areas of need.

Ministry perceptions. The second problem we have seen most regularly in new church ministries is more subtle but equally serious. It is concerned with ministry styles. In the first months, and even years, of a new church significant demands are felt by a church body. There are financial pressures, relational pressures, and endless demands on leadership from both within and outside the church. As the church develops its abilities to grow spiritually and thus meet the needs of other believers, the work usually grows numerically. As that happens, the church is responsible to progressively support its diligent elders to allow them the time necessary to serve.

Regardless of the teaching of the New Testament on multiple leadership one or more of the elders may think that the principle load of the ministry rests on his shoulders. That is a mistake. As a church grows numerically the elders will each be shepherding a small segment of the body, and the corporate worship will reflect the growth of those individual parts. Otherwise, numerical growth simply produces a large gathering without leaders who shepherd the flock. There is a need for wisdom and discipline in those matters in remembering that the ministry of a church is a responsibility shared and a ministry charged to a plurality of men in any local assembly. Depending on the format of the Sunday meeting, it is important that each elder provide teaching and leadership to the assembly. That

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models the truth of multiple ministry before the church and safeguards the flock from strange interpretations from any one man. Take note that Corinth had a multiple leadership model and the church was split by dissension and pride. Solutions are found in function as well as form.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

After the initial obstacles of money and leadership styles are overcome, other considerations remain. Concerns over facilities, format, and community outreach are common. Establishment of regular home meetings and ministries to the men, the women, and the different age groups of the church are necessary in many cases. Certain additional observations may be helpful.

THE CHURCH IN COMMUNITY AND CELEBRATION

In the New Testament we find a careful emphasis on small group gatherings, as seen in the meetings of house churches, as well as special meetings for ministry problems (Acts 6:1-7), prayer (Acts 12:6-17), and disciplinary matters (1 Cor. 5:1-5). As the assembly of believers grew, there came larger churches, usually known as city churches, which provided for new ministry opportunities for members of the body. The two ministries provided the necessary balance of spiritual life for the church.

In any church there must be regular small group meetings. Those meetings in the homes of the saints provide contexts for relationships in the body and between the leadership and the assembly. That will lead to natural expressions of evangelism and outreach to neighbors and friends who would never consider “going to church.” We have already seen in chapter 4 that this neighbor loving—as applied to believers and unbelievers—becomes the normal and natural context for church growth and evangelism (cf. Acts 2:42-47).

The home meetings and the shepherding groups of the church

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provide contexts for the growth and development of the maturing saint. The gathered meetings on Sunday becomes the expression of that growth in individual lives expressed in corporate praise. A glimpse into this meeting is seen in 1 Corinthians:

What then shall we say, brother? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All these must be done for the strengthening of the church....But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way (14:26, 40).

Apart from the questions of certain gifts for the church, notice the spirit and expectation of the New Testament body. As the believers gathered together, they came expecting to participate. We have already stated that there is no difference between laymen and clergy. We can also now say that all believers in the assembly are *ministers*. All are able and expected to participate in an orderly manner for the strengthening of the church.

In other words, if corporate expression is not allowed to take place in the body on a regular basis, then the church will not mature as it should. The careful balance between teaching and fellowship in small group meetings and corporate church life is vital for the church's health and growth.

ESTABLISHING MINISTRY CREDENTIALS FOR THE CHURCH

For a church formed to fulfill the guidelines of the New Testament model, certain temptations exist. They center on conforming to the expectations of either other churches in the area or the community at large. This conformity includes succumbing to looking for "church credentials" that fit traditional expectations. Essentially, these temptations take two forms: first, building up one man over another. This involves attaching the name of a man to a church (see

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chapter 8). That can be graciously resisted by affirming the truths of multiple leadership as well as the ministry responsibilities of a church as a body of believers.

The second temptation is just as apparent: building structures instead of people. It is the recognition that, almost universally, the church is seen as a physical plant more than a spiritual organism. Again, this temptation can be gently resisted. In our visitors' letter, we answer a number of typical questions raised about our church: "When are you planning to build?" Our answer: "We have no plans to build." In the Portland church, after a year, the Lord provided, without cost or debt, a large facility valued in excess of \$500,000. They had just settled into enjoying the ministry on Sunday under the shadow of a gymnasium backboard. It is fine if the Lord provides a facility. But it is not worth pursuing as a necessary ministry goal. Building programs are certainly not worth church indebtedness; in some cases such funds absorb as much as fifty cents of every ministry dollar. Remember, the kingdom of God consists of spiritual more than physical matters (Rom. 14:17).

Ministry credentials are not established through corporate structures and institutions of brick and mortar. They are established by corporate growth and maturity. This is to be accomplished in a manner that proclaims Christ, and provides for the equipping of the saints for the work of service.

CONCLUSIONS

The Body of Christ, like its Model, should have two specialties. It should first specialize in truth. We want the claims of truth to be primary. We desire to avoid mental laziness, which lets conventional ideas dictate the course of the church. We want the ministries of the church to be measured according to the standard of the New Testament and the leadership to be responsible to the Chief Shepherd for the nurture and care of the flock.

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But we also desire a second specialty: grace. We are to be men and women of grace, committed to a gentle spirit with those around us and a quiet but firm confidence in Christ. In any church planting effort both specialties must be valued as great priorities. Men and women must follow the dictates of the Word, their personal consciences, and the desire for community ministry.