

Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How? The Biblical Basis for Church Planting

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Peter Wagner says that “the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches,” but what does the Bible have to say about church planting?¹ Just as with anything else in life, we must primarily consider what Scripture has to say about the matter. Since we’re talking about the multiplication of *God’s church*, the importance of a biblical understanding of church planting is imperative. In one sense, the Bible says nothing about church planting. The words “church” and “plant” (or any such combination of related words) are not used together anywhere in Scripture. In another sense, the Bible says a lot about church planting as it describes the development of God’s kingdom on earth and the means God uses to advance his church.

Upon closer examination, we find that the Bible answers all of the most important questions we should be asking about church planting, namely: 1) *who* should plant churches, 2) *what* kinds of churches they should plant, 3) *when* and *where* churches should be planted, 4) *why* churches should be planted, and 6) *how* churches should be planted. Of course, the Bible doesn’t answer *every* relevant question about church planting, but it is the point at which every church plant must begin. There are plenty of other books out there that discuss various methods and practical considerations for church planting, but the Bible is the only worthy fundamental basis for any church plant. We must start with the Bible and derive the rest of our questions about practice from it. So, what does the Bible have to say about church planting?

I. Why Plant Churches?

The Need for Planting Churches

The question of “Why plant churches?” is the first question we must ask before we examine any of the other questions. We need a biblical reason for planting churches before we even think

¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 78.

about going through with it. Even a casual student of Scripture will find that the church, the body of Christ, is God's appointed means of kingdom advancement. Edmund Clowney said "Jesus came to gather, and to call gatherers, disciples who would gather with him, seeking the poor and helpless from city streets and country roads.... Mission is not an optional activity for Christ's disciples. If they are not gatherers, they are scatterers."² The appointed method of kingdom advancement is to preach the good news of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). In so doing, people will gather, and gathering God's people leads to the growth and advancement of the church. To put it simply, people who don't know Jesus need to get to know Jesus. So, why is it that growing the church is the best way to achieve that end? Furthermore, is church planting even the best practice for growing the church?

Brian Vos says that the answer to that question is simple: "Church planting is essential because the risen Christ has bound Himself to the assembly of His people on the Lord's Day."³ From a practical standpoint, if it weren't for church planting, there would be no church today. The modern church exists because the early Christians planted churches. Those churches then planted churches, and so on. Tim Keller maintains that planting churches is the single most effective method for numerical growth of the kingdom and the continual corporate renewal and revival of existing churches.⁴ In his opinion, church planting trumps crusades, outreach programs, parachurch ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, various renewal processes, and anything else under the sun. Those other means of kingdom advancement aren't inherently wrong, nor should they necessarily be abandoned, but the point is

² Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 159.

³ Brian Vos, "The Fruitful Grain of Wheat," in *Planting, Watering, Growing: Planting Confessionally Reformed Churches in the 21st Century* (eds. Daniel R. Hyde and Shane Lems; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011). Kindle Edition. Chapter 1, Location 451.

⁴ Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Manual* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2002), 29.

that church planting is the *most effective* method to spread the gospel. The defense of this point is not primarily that church growth researchers have confirmed this to be true (they have!). The point is that the Bible, particularly the NT, describes the growth of the early church by means of church planting.

The apostle Paul points out the need for believers to bear Christ's message to the world in Rom 10:14-15: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?"⁵ Preachers need to be sent to proclaim God's word and establish new churches! This is the means that God has chosen to draw unbelievers to himself. Jesus' disciples followed his commands to reach out and preach to the world doing evangelism, baptizing people as they became believers, and teaching them to obey Jesus' commands themselves. This is how the church multiplied, as evidenced in mainly in the book of Acts and in the Pauline Epistles, and this is how the church will continue to multiply throughout the church age.

The Motivation for Planting Churches

The gospel author Luke and the Apostle Paul give us the biblical evidence and description of church planting, but where do we find the motivation for church planting? In the OT, we are introduced to the concept of a man being sent by God (Abram in Gen 12:1) to establish a new gathering of people. Abram stepped out in faith, leaving the comfort of home to enter into a foreign land to live distinctively from the natives. Through Abraham and his family, all the nations of the world were to be blessed (Gen 12:2). While God's people, Abraham's descendants, moved back and forth from faithfulness to rebellion, God has always maintained a

⁵ All quotations of Scripture are taken from the *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

faithful remnant to carry on the line of his promise to be witnesses to the truth. It is this same remnant that is preserved throughout the generations, continuing into the NT era as the church.

In the NT, the motivation to expand the kingdom comes directly from Jesus and can be found in all four gospel accounts and at the beginning of Acts. As the head of the church, Jesus tells us in his own words why we should plant churches. He made it clear that he wanted to build and strengthen his church, preparing it for battle (Matt 16:18). In his popular book *Planting Missional Churches*, Ed Stetzer suggests that there are four crucial “commissioning” statements in which Jesus instructed the early church to respond to his teachings.⁶ One such commissioning relates the sending of Christ to the sending of the church. Jesus said that “as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). What was the Father sending his only begotten Son to do? Jesus tells us that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The church, as the body of Jesus Christ, is called to pick up his earthly work and continue it. Jesus promises that such work will be blessed. He said “whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

By “greater works,” Jesus meant that the disciples, working by the authority of his name, would advance the kingdom of God to a degree far beyond what Jesus had begun in his own earthly (human) ministry. This proved to be true early on as the church grew rapidly within the first century alone. The book of Acts repeatedly tells us, for example, that “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7). Note that the Bible is not talking about one big mega-church in Jerusalem, but multiple churches. Acts 16:5 says that “the *churches* were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (emphasis mine). And so, those greater works to which Jesus referred began as soon as

⁶ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 37.

the Holy Spirit descended upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:2-4) and rapidly increased as the churches grew and multiplied.

Another of Jesus' commissioning statements is found in Mark 16:15, where he said to his disciples "go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." Two key elements of all of Jesus' sending statements are that the *gospel* should go to the *entire world* (or to the nations as in other verses). The gospel is the "good news" of Jesus Christ. It is through him that the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting are found. It is through him that reconciliation and a right relationship with God are found. This good news is too good for believers to keep to themselves, so it is imperative that they share it with others. With whom are they to share this good news? Jesus tells us that the entire world needs to hear it.

Luke 24:47 echoes the sending statement in Mark's gospel, saying that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." In this verse, Jesus adds the need for repentance to accompany the proclamation of the gospel. God's people need to know that they need to repent. Jesus also tells us that the good news should go forth starting from the very place it began. In the case of the disciples, that starting point was Jerusalem. For the Christian reader, this means that they should seek to advance the gospel message in their own neighborhoods, in their own cities. The work of missions begins right where you are, and sometimes that's exactly where a church needs to be planted.

Luke recorded another of Jesus' sending statements in Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them and they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. Again, he is emphasizing the need for the disciples to start where they are on the work of gospel advancement. To this, he adds the crucial fact that the Holy Spirit himself, along with his divine

power, will accompany the disciples in their work. God intends to multiply his church, so he has given his own power for his people to wield in order to accomplish that task.

The Great Commission

We find the most famous of Jesus' commissioning statements in Matt 28:18-20, the passage commonly known as The Great Commission. The apostle Matthew records Jesus' words to his disciples before he ascended into heaven. Jesus said "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Many things may be gleaned from this passage, which most agree is the clearest biblical support (or mandate) for church planting.

First, Jesus has called the disciples to "disciple-making," as opposed to what we might commonly think of as *merely* evangelism. The distinction is that disciple-making is much more comprehensive than evangelism. Though the believer is declared righteous (justified), he must also be made holy (sanctified) in order to see the Lord (cf. Heb 12:14). The act of evangelism is designed to move the hearer to make a decision for Christ, to make a profession of faith in Jesus. While such a decision or proclamation of faith does indeed grow the kingdom, it does not inherently "make disciples." In his book *Planting Growing Churches*, Aubrey Malphurs says it well, that "conversion is meant to be germinal not terminal, the beginning not the end, of a close relationship with Christ."⁷ There need to be both decisions for Christ and disciples of Christ. Often, churches fall to one extreme or the other in their focus, but the Great Commission insists on *both* evangelism and discipleship.

⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 362.

Disciple-making consists of the ongoing pouring into a person so that they are not only converted, but also taught to obey all that Jesus commanded. Of course, Jesus commanded a great many things! It is a task of the church to train people up in the obedience and righteousness of Christ. Only the church is able to meet this need using the various means of grace given to it: by proclaiming the very word of God, by worshiping in Spirit and truth, by ordaining elders to teach and to lead, by utilizing the multitude of gifts given to its members, by rebuking and exhorting and disciplining, and by meeting the material and physical needs of the people. All of these elements are essential for the church, and all are most effective in the church setting. This is the process of disciple-making, the process of sanctification.

We must also notice this this Great Commission is not just a call to make disciples but also to baptize them. This is another point where the church comes into play. In Acts (e.g. Acts 2:41-47) and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries.⁸ The church provides itself a great corrective, on the one hand looking to church history to avoid errors of the past, and on the other hand looking to its current Spirit-indwelt members to redirect itself back to orthodoxy. Stetzer points out that baptism is an ordinance of the local church and should take place within the context of the local church.⁹ Many but not all denominations make this their practice. Not all require the sacraments to accompany the preaching of the Word within the context of a worship service.

Debate has ensued throughout the generations about whether this commissioning was only for the apostles or if it was for the continuing church. Several church fathers have suggested that these sending statements of Christ, including the Great Commission, were for the apostles only.¹⁰

⁸ Keller and Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Manual*, 30.

⁹ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 40. Of course, we see exceptions to this practice in Scripture. For instance, Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch without anyone else present (Acts 8:38).

¹⁰ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 38.

The implications for such a view are huge! Certainly, while these statements of Christ were given to a specific people at a given time, we must consider Scripture as a living document with relevance to God's people from generation to generation. Therefore, we cannot disregard this commissioning as having expired at the close of the apostolic age. It is imperative that the church continues without ceasing the practice of disciple-making.

II. What Kinds of Churches Should We Plant?

What is a Church Plant?

So the church is called to multiply itself, and the way that it has done so is to plant churches. But what exactly constitutes a church plant? The churches of the first century are identifiable as a group of people who meet together. Hence, Paul writes to the Christians who meet together in Philippi or Corinth (e.g. Phil 1:1; 1 Cor 1:2). So a church plant is clearly more than an occasional or *ad hoc* gathering of Christians; rather it is a group which is committed to each other as a church.¹¹ Furthermore, a church should strive to have an established leadership, examples of which we see in Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. Graham Beynon points out, however, that the church should be known more for its *function* than its *form*.¹²

Functions of Early Churches

Where in Scripture do we find the prescribed functions for the church? According to Malphurs, the church is organized to function in two primary ways.¹³ The first primary function is to carry out the ordinances (sacraments) of baptism (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:41) and the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 11:23-25). The second primary function is to obey the Great Commission,

¹¹ Graham Beynon, *Planting for the Gospel* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2011), Kindle Edition: Chapter 1, Location 148-51.

¹² Beynon, *Planting for the Gospel*, 152-53.

¹³ Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 25.

which includes the evangelization¹⁴ of unbelievers and the edification of the church. Luke records many of the functions related to the edification of the church in one passage, in Acts 2:42-47.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

In this passage we find evidence of doctrinal teaching (2:42), fellowship (2:42), worship (2:42, 46), prayer (2:42), benevolent giving (2:44–45), and community reaching (2:47).

Doctrinal Teaching

The doctrinal teaching aspect of this passage reminds us that the church is responsible for training and educating its members. This is reflective of a distinct emphasis on learning the apostolic teaching (Scripture). The power and authenticity of this apostolic teaching was confirmed by the many signs and wonders that accompanied it. Heb 2:3-4 teaches us that the purpose of these signs and wonders in the early church was to show the listeners the truth of the gospel message. Given this evidence, the early church believers devoted themselves to this apostolic teaching. They were students of the word (or “people of the Book” as they were commonly called) and they sought to understand how Scripture applied to their lives. Biblical doctrine was the early church’s basis for right living. This passage in Acts serves as a model for right living, a way of life that was a true blessing for believers. The modern church should pay attention to the way the early church approached the study of biblical doctrine.

¹⁴ See the “How Should Churches Be Planted?” section below for a discussion on biblically based evangelization of unbelievers.

Fellowship

The fellowship aspect directs us toward a model of moving members into relationships of mutual support and encouragement.¹⁵ People cared for, supported, and guided one another toward godly living. They were essential parts of each other's lives. Their fellowship would have certainly become extremely intimate. Believers dug into each other's lives as they engaged in fellowship "day by day." As we may still find with deep fellowship in the church today, the body of believers becomes family, which is a glimpse of the sort of family we will enjoy for eternity.

In addition, it seems that sharing a meal together was of major importance to the believers in early church plants. Indeed, there is something special about "breaking bread" together with other believers, the model for which may be found in Jesus' many meals with his disciples – most significantly the Passover meal on the night before he was betrayed which we now know as The Last Supper. The phrase "the breaking of bread" may, in fact, be referring specifically to the practice of the Lord's Supper sacrament, given the article in "*the* breaking of bread."

Regardless, simply sharing a meal together reminds us of Christ's sacrifice on behalf of his people. Also, there is nothing like a meal to bring God's people together for fellowship, prayer, and the sharing of resources. Breaking bread, therefore, is an essential part of church planting according to Scripture.

Worship & Prayer

The worship aspect includes the preaching of the word and was typically accompanied by the sacraments. In the corporate worship setting, many of the aspects of the church are present at once – teaching (preaching), praising, fellowship, prayer, and giving. This underscores the importance of the Lord's Day worship services, which should be the center piece and focal point of every church plant. Community groups and other smaller gatherings of believers clearly have

¹⁵ Keller and Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Manual*, 33.

their place (they are endorsed in Scripture – even in this passage in Acts 2:46), but the Bible’s emphasis is on the weekly large group worship gathering at the temple.

Prayer seems to have accompanied every gathering of believers, no matter which function was being observed. Constant prayer was a regular practice of every early church plant. More specific prayers may be in view in this text, however. “*The prayers*” likely alludes to an orderly liturgy of some sort. They were probably not merely random prayers. So, we may conclude by the plurality of prayers mentioned in this passage that worship services in particular were bathed in prayer.

Benevolent Giving

The aspect of benevolent giving was a radical practice of stewardship, economic sharing, and mercy ministry within the community of believers. This aspect likely reached beyond the assembly of believers and into the community to some degree. “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10). This teaches that the church family was to be the primary focus of the mercy ministry, while aiming to “do good to everyone” as the means are available to do so. This should serve as a reminder to modern churches and mission works to care for the needs of believers first. The church today often gets this backward.

Community Reaching

The evangelistic efforts of the early church were also greatly blessed. Their outreach was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, new believers were being converted daily. Keller points out that these conversions were not seen individualistically, but rather, when

a person was saved, they were “added to their number.”¹⁶ They became an integral part of the community of believers.

Part of the reason that we see so many conversions in the early church is that their works were accompanied by power. Unbelievers took notice of the power and were drawn to it “day by day.” Even in the most effective modern churches, we don’t see this kind of “success.” Why is that? Granted, we don’t have apostles any longer to draw the attention of unbelievers with miraculous signs, and yet we do still wield the power of the Holy Spirit. In practically focused church planting books, they call this effect “living in a Christian bubble.” The early church didn’t live in a bubble. This is one of the strategic appeals of church planting, that, at least for a time, the church is much more outwardly focused and effective at community reaching.

Time Investment

All of these aspects or functions should be center pieces for a biblical church plant. Of course, these primary functions (theological teaching, intimate fellowship, joyous worship, relentless evangelism, and sacrificial giving) require something even more fundamental which may or may not be obvious. It requires that believers should spend significant amounts of *time together* doing these functions, a point which ought to be challenging for the “lone ranger” types who think they can do church on their own (cf. Heb 10:25). These gatherings of believers were held both in the smaller settings of home as well as the larger settings of the temple courts.¹⁷ Therefore, both small group gatherings and large group worship services are appropriate forms of worship. Early believers were together practically all the time! I pray that our modern church could learn from this lesson as we have so badly isolated ourselves from our life-giving community in recent years.

¹⁶ Keller and Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Manual*, 34.

¹⁷ Keller and Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planting Manual*, 33.

III. Who Should Plant Churches?

The Model Church Planter

The apostle Paul was the greatest missionary in history and is our single greatest example of a church planter. In 1 Cor 11:1, Paul tells the NT reader that they should “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Certainly, Paul’s ministry is the clearest biblical model for the church planter himself. So what did Paul do that was worthy of imitation? What did he want his readers, including us, and especially potential church planters, to imitate? Identifying the values and actions of Paul can enrich the ministry of every modern-day church planter.¹⁸

To begin, Paul was personally prepared for his church planting ministry. He had received thorough formal training in the Scriptures (the OT) which gave him a broad understanding of God’s work in and through his people throughout history. His heart was focused on the mission, to reach the lost and win them for Christ (Rom 10:1). He was also vitally connected with God via prayer (2 Cor 12:7-9). Furthermore, he was committed to sound theology (2 Tim 4:1-5). Finally, he became prepared by stepping out into his preaching ministry in the synagogues after only a handful of days with the disciples (Acts 9:20–22). We are also told that Paul lived an exemplary life (1 Thess 2), enough so that he was worthy of being imitated as he himself imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1).

Paul was also quite a gifted evangelist. He began preaching the gospel shortly after his conversion (Acts 9:19-22). He was a “fisher of men” 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;

¹⁸ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 44.

19:9-10).¹⁹ His method was to “cast a wide net,” but his aim was to pour into those who were most receptive to the gospel (Acts 18:6).

Scripture also teaches that Paul was an entrepreneurial leader – an excellent quality often thought of as necessary for visionary church planters. He had received a vision and call directly from God (Acts 9:15; Rom 15:20-23). His vision was to be the apostle to the Gentiles by leading missionary teams into new territories to plant churches. These missionary teams engaged in evangelism, and the fruits of those labors resulted in new churches. Paul specifically 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). Of course, Paul made his own sacrifices as well. He 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 by outsiders (Acts 16:25).

Occasionally, Paul thought it best to disallow someone from being part of the team (Acts 15:38). He also appointed permanent local leaders to lead in his stead at the churches he planted (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The Lord provided him with the direction as to where his team should plant, and his ministry partners had confidence in the wisdom of his decisions (Acts 16:6-10). He established a reproducible pattern for church planting (“reasoning in the synagogues” – Acts 14:1; 17:2), and he deliberately planned his ministry in advance (Acts 19:21). Church planters should consider what “reasoning in the synagogues” will look like in their own ministries, in their own contexts. What will their “synagogues” be?

Paul's leadership was characterized by flexible, risk-taking pioneering (1 Cor 9:19-21). He constantly sought out new territory to expand the reach of the gospel (Rom 15:20). He was constantly targeting new groups (Rom 11:1), not wanting to duplicate the work of others. Not

¹⁹ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 44.

only was Paul a visionary leader, but he was also a pastoral leader. He often invested personally in the lives of believers (Acts 20:31; 1 Thess 2:7-11). He was vitally concerned with the growth and development of new converts to Christ (Acts 14:22). Paul cared for many people in his shepherd role, including his partners in ministry (2 Tim 1:2). He gladly did what he could to equip others for the work of ministry. He recognized his own strengths and weaknesses and delegated to others according to their strengths (Titus 1:5). In fact, in order to lead this rapidly growing movement, he risked delegation to young Christians (Acts 16:1-3).

Paul also sought kingdom advancement over his own glory. He was willing to let his best teammates leave his team in order to be most beneficial to the kingdom of God (Acts 17:14). Paul was willing to let go of his church plants and move on to plant more churches (Acts 16:40). He had faith in God's ability to keep the churches he started strong, thus allowing him to leave (Acts 20:32). 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 this to the church at Antioch which was willing to let go of its top leaders (Acts 13:1-4). The church he planted in Ephesus was possibly Paul's strongest plant and the best model we have to follow for establishing new churches (Acts 19:10). It seems that Paul himself needed special encouragement to stay in a city for very long (Acts 18:9-11). The longest he ever stayed in any one place was three years (Acts 20:31).

Biblical Qualifications for Church Planters

Paul was a model church planter, and aspiring church planters should certainly strive to imitate him. However, Paul's model for church planting won't fit every situation. Admittedly, Paul's miraculous gifts are also quite difficult to duplicate. So, what characteristics should we measure to qualify a post-apostolic church planter?

A trait of a church planter which is extremely important yet cannot be measured biblically is having a discernible call to ministry. Such a call to ministry, and specifically a calling to plant a church, should come with at least some visible blessings of the Lord. When Barnabas was called to investigate the boldness of the preaching of Cyprus and Cyrene in Antioch during a time of great persecution, he saw the grace of God upon them, and so he encouraged them to continue (Acts 11:23).²⁰ When the apostles heard about these guys' preaching, they were concerned, but when he got there and saw for himself, Barnabas recognized the Lord at work and backed off. The lesson for us is that the guidance of elders and much prayer are necessary as a potential church planter seeks to embark on the Lord's mission and to discover the Lord's direction in his life.

Nevertheless, there are more quantifiable characteristics to consider with regard to church planting. The most comprehensive list of these qualifications is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy.

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:1-7)

We must take an extensive look at the qualifications for an elder because a church planter must be an elder. Admittedly, this list of qualifications is somewhat un-remarkable, given that these very same qualities are expected in every Christian (except possibly the ability to teach). Of course, this passage also indicates that an elder must be a man, a "husband of one wife."

²⁰ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 80.

The reason for this strong emphasis on qualification is that elders are charged with the sacred task of caring for the eternal souls for whom Christ died.²¹ Since a pastor has the extremely important job of teaching and caring for eternal souls, it is important to make sure that the wrong men or unqualified men are not appointed to this office. Elders must be men who are well known and respected by the community, have tested character and proven integrity, and are doctrinally sound. Michael Horton illustrates the role of the elder well, saying that “pastors, teachers, and elders are not life coaches who help us in our personalized goals for spiritual fitness.”²² Elders are gifts given by the risen Lord Jesus, so that the whole church might become mature and less susceptible to being spiritually tricked (Eph 4:1-16). Elders must also be men who can pastor themselves as well as others, having personal self-discipline and maturity, as well as the ability to relate well to others and to teach and care for them. Finally, in plurality of elders, there is accountability and a strength that one man alone lacks.²³

The office of church planter requires at least these qualifications, though most wouldn’t consider this to be a comprehensive list of competencies for church planting. Some secondary church planting skills include vision casting, generating energy, motivation, inspiration, and organization.²⁴ The primary relevant skills for church planting (as well as leading an established church) are teaching the whole counsel of God, shepherding the flock, and leading the church. These correspond to the three offices of Christ – prophet, priest, and king. Focusing too heavily on any one of these primary aspects in church planting can lead to undesired consequences. On the flip side, it is also unreasonable to expect a church planter to be fully gifted in all three areas.

²¹ Darrin Patrick, *Church Planter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 43.

²² Michael Horton, “No Church, No Problem,” in *Planting, Watering, Growing: Planting Confessionally Reformed Churches in the 21st Century* (eds. Daniel R. Hyde and Shane Lems; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011). Kindle Edition. Chapter 4, Locations 1298-1300.

²³ See below for a discussion about church planting alone or as a pair/team.

²⁴ Patrick, *Church Planter*, 67.

Planting in Pairs: Descriptive or Prescriptive?

The biblical model for planting churches is often described as being done by pairs. The question arises: is church planting in pairs descriptive or prescriptive? Is it essential or imperative to plant churches in pairs or teams rather than as a solo “scratch” planter? What may be the most challenging aspect of church planting is that the planter is often alone in his ministry. Eccl 4:10 says “woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”

Certainly, there is biblical precedent for people being sent in pairs or ministry teams. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two, they were sent “two by two” (Luke 10:1). Paul’s *modus operandi* for ministry was to work as part of a missionary team. He was more than willing to be on a team (Acts 13:1-5). In fact, he always planted his churches as part of a team, never alone (Acts 15:40; 16:6; 20:4). He also had a sending mother church to which he reported back (Acts 14:26-28).

Admittedly, Paul was not the only church planter recorded in the NT. When Philip went to Samaria (Acts 8:4-40), there is no indication that he was sent with anyone else. As Philip was leading people to Christ, word got back to the apostles in Jerusalem. So, they sent Peter and John to investigate, but they discovered that Philip had already been establishing a church by baptizing the converts. However, Peter and John discovered that the baptism Philip was administering was incomplete because it was done solely in the name of Jesus. The point is that the evidence suggests that Philip largely worked alone, although there was a consequence to that particular individual effort. Still, we are left with the question of whether this practice is normative or descriptive. Should we expect certain additional problems to arise *because* we plant churches alone?

Although a solo planter establishing a church is the most common method of church planting today, it's the least common method recorded in the New Testament. This does not imply that it

did not happen. Early church history reflects that several of the apostles set out in different directions to plant churches.²⁵ Whether biblically appropriate or not, this must have been a lonely endeavor for the solo church planter and it reminds us of the importance of bringing a team to plant or developing one soon upon arrival.

IV. When & Where Should Churches Be Planted?

Paul's method was to plant urban churches in Asia Minor and Eastern Europe. He was what we might call a "serial church planter." He would establish a church by preaching the gospel in an unreached urban center and then leave each growing newborn church in the hands of capable ministry partners and local elders. Acts 14:23 tells us that "when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (cf. Titus 1:5). After the church was fairly established, Paul would move on to begin gospel work in another "unreached" area, noting that he had finished his work in the region (cf. Rom 15:19, 23).

From this, we should conclude that Paul was primarily interested in planting churches for unreached peoples. Paul did not plant new churches with a different philosophy of ministry in the same area as an established local church. This is descriptive of Paul's practice as a church planter and not prescriptive or normative for every potential church planting situation.

Therefore, while there is nothing inherently wrong with planting on another church's "turf," the church planter should be primarily focused on reaching the unreached in the target area. What's more, target areas should be chosen based on the potential to reach the unreached, which is a key practical consideration to be sure. The main takeaway we should glean from Paul's choices of where to plant churches is that he aimed to reach new people, not to establish new churches for

²⁵ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 76.

existing believers. When the new church was ready to lead itself, then it was time for Paul to move on.

V. How Should Churches Be Planted?

The Pattern of Development of the Early Church

After having studied all other preliminary questions and considerations, it is now appropriate to investigate what the Bible says about the method of planting a church. We know the need for church planting. We have a good idea what church plants should look like. We generally know who should plant them and where they should be planted.²⁶ We are left with the question that we have wanted to answer all along: *How do we plant biblical churches biblically?* Stetzer's look at the book of Acts through a church planter's lens is a striking glimpse into the NT perspective of advancing the kingdom of God, which greatly helps us to answer the question.²⁷

Church Planting in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)

The first seven chapters of the book of Acts focus on the establishment of the church in Jerusalem. This section can serve as a modern template for planting churches in the city where we already live, "our Jerusalem." From the beginning of the book, we see that new churches are born in prayer (1:12-14). Early Christians were devoted to prayer – seeing the need for and importance of it as they sought to advance the kingdom of God. Reading along in Acts confirms that they were constant in prayer. The reason that the prayers of the early church were effectual is because they were bathed in the Spirit (2:1-4) – that is, the people were filled with the Holy Spirit. The first thing that the apostles did in Jerusalem after receiving the power of the Spirit was to begin preaching the gospel with boldness as seen in Peter's sermon (2:14-39; cf. 4:31).

²⁶ Certainly there is a more subjective element to these questions than there is for the other questions. Discerning a call to church planting and choosing a place to plant can both appear to be done biblically while missing the mark.

²⁷ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 47.

Peter proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem that Jesus was the promised Messiah to whom the OT pointed.

As new believers came to faith, which happened repeatedly in Acts, the church baptized them (2:41). As has been examined above, the functions of the early church were laid out in Acts 2:42-47. These included doctrinal teaching (2:42), fellowship (2:42), worship (2:42, 46), prayer (2:42; cf. 4:29-31), benevolent giving (2:44-45; cf. 4:34-35), and identification with the community (2:47).

In Acts 4, we see the strength of the believers' witness (4:33; 5:42). They had prayed for such strength, and the Lord immediately answered the prayer. When our prayers align with God's will like that, his approval is unmistakable. The boldness they showed in preaching, along with the power given by the Holy Spirit, resulted in rapid church growth (2:41). People were being saved daily (2:47). Two thousand more unbelievers were converted on Solomon's Portico (4:4). Multitudes of men and women were added to the number of the church (5:14). The church was experiencing a steady and incredible growth, in which even the priests came to believe (6:7). So many believers were added to the fold that the church needed to be organized. Leadership had to be established. So the church was arranged into apostles (6:2), deacons (6:3), lay people (6:5), and eventually elders (15:6, 22). What an amazing time to plant churches! I pray that this uncanny growth would not be a discouragement to modern church planters. One has only to remember that the preaching of the word came with extraordinary apostolic power at the time.

Church Planting in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)

Chapters 8-12 of Acts offer a picture of the church planting efforts in the rest of Judea and Samaria, still within the same region but to a new people. Because of a great persecution, the church was forced to look outside Jerusalem to further its mission. Salvation and the anointing

of the Holy Spirit were finally coming to the Gentiles (10:44-48). During this period, we see the effort of church planting headed up by the laity (8:1, 4). Their ministries were marked by mass evangelism (8:5-6, 12) and preaching the gospel in villages (8:25). As a result, the churches continued to multiply (9:31). Church growth was steady and was enhanced by the power of signs and wonders, particularly the resurrection of the dead (9:35-42).

Church Planting in the World (Acts 13–20)

Beginning in chapter 13, the church focused on the effort of multiplication in the rest of the known world. At this point, emphasis shifted from the Jews to the Gentiles (13:46). The church at Antioch became the great missionary church. For example, they became the sending church for Paul and Barnabas (13:3). From there, Paul's embarked on his First Missionary Journey (13-14). It is here that he established his pattern for church planting. As always, he began by preaching first in the synagogues of the cities he targeted (13:5; 14:1). He then moved from city to city (13:13-14), each time appointing elders to lead the churches (14:23). Periodically, he would return to check on the new churches he had planted (14:21).

Paul's second and third missionary journeys are recorded in the next section of Acts (15:40-21:17). Again, Paul went out into the mission field as part of a team (with Silas – 15:40). Again, he returned to visit the growing churches he had established (15:41; 18:23). Paul and his team followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit (16:9–10). They were always looking for signs of places and ways that God was calling them. Ministry during this period was marked by evangelism in households (16:15, 33) as well as teaching in the marketplace (17:17). A striking example of Paul's evangelism was his speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17. He reasoned with the people on their terms, contextualizing²⁸ the message by appealing to philosophers, poets, and even referring to an “altar of the unknown god.” Paul showed off his God-given strategic

²⁸ See below for a discussion on contextualization.

visionary traits as he established mother churches in urban areas (19:10) and then in house churches (20:20). Paul prioritized his ministry, focusing on those people who were responsive and “kicking off the dust” at those who scoffed and reviled him (18:6). This is a helpful lesson for potential church planters – spend time, as much as possible, where fruit is being borne. Confront the opposition, but let them go if they remain hard-hearted. This doesn’t mean we must say goodbye to our antagonistic acquaintances, but it does help us to prioritize our time.

Biblically Based Evangelism

Jesus made his disciples “fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). This was his prescribed method for advancing the kingdom, both during Jesus’ years of ministry and after his death and resurrection. These followers of Christ were taught to gather people to listen to hear the good news of the kingdom of God. In this manner, Jesus modeled evangelism by spending time with the lost. He hung out with the tax collectors and others sinners in Luke 5:27-32 because he came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. Jesus’ parables in Luke 15 are similar, which he was teaching in the presence of tax collectors and sinners. In the first century, “tax collectors” appears to have been the primary agreed-upon category for obvious transgressors of the law. To this mixed group of sinners and self-righteous Pharisees, Jesus taught the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Prodigal Son. The basic teaching in these parables is that the Lord delights every time a lost sheep is brought into his fold. Jesus’ statement in Luke 19, another story about the conversion of a rich tax collector (Zaccheus), summarizes well, that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” This is a matter of value. The message is that the Lord has placed a significant value on the lost; he loves them dearly.²⁹

²⁹ Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 357.

This should serve as a wake-up call to the church, which so easily and quickly becomes “ingrown” or self-centered. Malphurs suggests that there are certain benchmarks that the church can measure in order to determine if it has become ingrown.³⁰ One indicator of health in this area is that the church will begin to love lost people and pursue them individually and corporately. It will show as church people invite the lost into their homes to meet their families and break bread together. It will show when Christians attend various events together and are available when the lost go through the difficult struggles of life. The key is simply spending time with them, investing in their lives regardless of how “messy” it might be. Christians are not to become like lost people in this regard (Rom 12:2). Rather, they are to be distinctive from lost people in a manner that attracts them to Christ. The only way that this will actually work is to spend time with the lost.

Another biblical model for reaching the lost is to address their felt needs. Scripture gives many examples of this principle (e.g. Acts 2:45; 2 Cor 8:19; 9:12; Eph 4:29; Phil 4:19). Jesus regularly met people’s physical needs and used this as an opportunity to meet their spiritual needs. The idea is to start where lost people are and patiently take them where God wants them to be, as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.³¹

Malphurs also mentions a “principle of receptivity,” which suggests that we examine where people fall on the continuum of openness to the gospel.³² This continuum, at one extreme, begins with outright unbelief and ends at belief in Jesus. Those who are receptive to spiritual matters will likely be somewhere in the middle of this continuum, slowly moving toward belief. Various stressful and transitional events in people’s lives move them along this continuum, including physical problems, financial hardships, marriage, the birth of children, relational

³⁰ Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 358.

³¹ Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 359.

³² Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 359.

struggles, and especially the deaths of loved ones. A caveat to this principle of receptivity is that Christians should be careful not to inordinately invest their time in people who aren't responsive to the gospel. Jesus cautioned his disciples in this manner at several points in the gospels (Matt 10:11-15; parallel passages Mark 6:10-11 and Luke 9:4-6). Paul seemed to have followed this principle as well in Acts 13:48-52 and 18:6. We see several examples of "seekers" in Scripture, that is, those who are both receptive and responsive to the gospel. These include Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10), Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), and Cornelius (Acts 10).

The Christian should also consider their "style" of evangelism, understanding that there are many different types of people. In his book *Honest to God?* Bill Hybels identifies six styles or methods of evangelism.³³ The first is the confrontational style demonstrated in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2. The second involves using reason to persuade, the intellectual style used by Paul in Acts 17:3. The third is the testimonial style, sharing all the Jesus had done, used by the blind man in John 9. The fourth is the relational style used by the demon-possessed man in Mark 5:20. The fifth style is the invitational style that Jesus used with the woman at the well in John 4. The sixth is the serving style used by Dorcas in Acts 9:36. Of course, any combination of these styles may be effective at a given time and with a certain "category" of person, young or old, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, urban or rural, and people of various races, personalities, values, political affinities, nationalities, and religious backgrounds. Such diversity calls for flexibility and possibly creativity in evangelism.

³³ Bill Hybels, *Honest to God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 126-32.

Some Thoughts on Contextualization

Paul teaches on the principle of contextualization, or cultural adaptation, in 1 Cor 9:19-23 and 10:23-33. He famously spoke about “being all things to all people.” We also see this principle in Jesus’ ministry, for example in John 3-4. Contextualization helps people to understand the gospel. Tim Keller offers some insight as to what to make of contextualization:

Contextualization is not – as is often argued – “giving people what they want to hear.” Rather, it is giving people the Bible’s answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them. Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself.³⁴

Of course, contextualization is only right insofar as the clear teaching of Scripture is never changed or compromised in any way. So often in church history, this principle has been misunderstood and misapplied. This leads to great concern that the gospel will be compromised, some of which is warranted, while some is not.³⁵ Without succumbing to one of the many possible pitfalls of contextualization (by deviating from biblical principles – cf. Rom 12:1), we must glean from Paul’s desire to reach the lost by adapting to their culture without losing the distinctives of Jesus’ teaching. Preachers must especially be sure to limit themselves, as Paul did, to proclaiming Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).

Malphurs says that “the church should adapt its practices, not its faith, to the people it’s trying to reach.” Some of the aspects of church that should be “up for grabs” or negotiable are the meeting time(s) and location of the church, which translation of the Bible it uses, the instruments used in worship, casual versus formal attire, the frequency of partaking in the Lord’s

³⁴ Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 89.

³⁵ An example of improper contextualization is the “Insider Movement” in missions to Muslims, as well as the idea of changing the wording of “Son of God” in order to be more appealing to Muslims.

Supper, the color of the sanctuary carpet, and so on. The mature church must be willing to be flexible and put aside its own cultural and individual preferences for the purpose of reaching the lost. The question Christians should ask is “What are you willing to give up in order to reach lost people?” Our Father in heaven gave up his only begotten Son for them (John 3:16). Jesus was willing to lay down his own life for them (Rom 5:8). Paul was willing to give up his soul for them (Rom 9:3). The church must consider the importance of their preferences in light of the kingdom need of reaching the lost sheep.