

Church Planting

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Part I

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The Divine Mandate

The last mandate Jesus gave to His disciples before He ascended to His Father in heaven was, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mat 28:19-10 NIV)

Often we in the Evangelical church have misunderstood what Jesus said. We tend to interpret His command as "make converts." It's a whole lot easier to make converts than disciples! A good, prayer-birthing evangelistic outreach will usually make converts, but it takes teaching, guiding, encouraging, mentoring and demonstrating a daily walk with Jesus to make disciples. In other words, it takes a church setting to make disciples.

This is why the early church, in fulfilling Jesus' command, immediately set about establishing churches. The first century church's leaders quickly learned that the most effective way of making disciples was to establish a church. I believe that for us to be obedient to Jesus' command, we, too, are to establish churches until He returns!

An Example from Scripture

Of course, we know that the Apostle Paul was probably the most effective church planter in our history. Let's look at his commissioning.

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (Act 13:1-3 NIV)

Scripture does not tell us what Paul's position was in the Antioch church or how long he had worshiped there but we do know he and Barnabas were commissioned there. Notice the setting in which the Antioch church leadership heard the Holy Spirit's instructions concerning Paul and Barnabas.

Worshiping and Fasting

The Antioch church was fasting and worshiping. Scripture does not tell us exactly why they were fasting, but we generally associate Christians fasting with a spiritual burden. Fasting is a very effective way to focus our entire being on spiritual things. We may have a burden on our heart and we are unable to deal with it without God's direct intervention. The act of diminishing our physical appetites to sharpen or focus our spiritual man brings us more in tune with the Lord. Worship just naturally flows from the spirit of one who is fasting.

This was the atmosphere among the church leadership of Antioch. So, even if we don't know why they were fasting, we do know that it was in the midst of this worshiping and fasting that they heard the voice of the Holy Spirit! I believe every denominational leadership, church leadership, and/or individual who has a burden to send out church plants, (or go themselves), should begin the process with prayer, fasting, and worship.

That's the way the Antioch church sent out the most

powerful apostle in church history and we should do no less.

Sending Out

1. The Apostle

In the first century, and I believe continuing through today, the Lord has most often used apostles to plant churches. That is their call and they are equipped to do so. We read in Acts about Paul's journeys and establishing of churches. After he planted a church in a location, he moved on. But he remained in an oversight position for the churches he founded. His letters to Timothy are those of an overseeing apostle to a pastor whom he had previously selected. Look at the following instructions Paul gave Timothy:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work-which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. (1 Tim 1:3-7 NIV)

Clearly, Paul was keeping close watch on the churches under him. We know from his trips and his writings that he revisited many of the churches he planted. He knew what was happening. He knew who the troublemakers were. He knew which ones were totally sold out to Jesus. Not only did he know these things, he made corrections when necessary. Sometimes the correction was blunt. Look at what he wrote to the Corinthian church:

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you. (2 Cor 13:1-4 NIV)

As Paul was the first great apostle, that same call to the office of the apostle exists today. As with any call to the ministry, the initiative is the Lord's. No minister simply decides he wants to be an apostle, (or a prophet, evangelist, pastor, or teacher, for that matter.) He or she must be called to that office by the Lord Jesus.

In my travels to the developing nations of the world I meet many apostles. I have fellowshipped with a number of African and Asian apostles, all busy building the Lord's church. They are national Christians planting churches in their own nations. Or in some cases, these apostles have gone to nations other than their own and are building churches where they are sent.

2. Denominational Church Planting and Oversight

Often in today's church the process of sending out someone to start a church, and to oversee new churches, is done by the local or regional leadership of an established denomination. It is this leadership, acting in an apostolic office, that sends out pastors to begin churches in new areas. This oversight, whether from an individual apostle or a selected group of denominational overseers, is what keeps the churches on the proper course. It keeps demonic activity to a minimum. And most importantly, it keeps the church focused on Jesus.

Scripture gives these overseers authority. Again we turn to Paul's writings:

For even if I boast somewhat freely about the *authority* the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present. (2 Cor 10:8-11 NIV, emphasis added.)

3. What if You're Not an Apostle But Want to Plant a Church?

At this point you may say, "I'm know I'm not an apostle. In fact I believe I'm a called pastor but the Lord sure has placed a burden on me to start a church. What should I do?" Even if you aren't an apostle, Jesus' words are not a divine option, they are a divine *command*. Though it is the *primary* responsibility of an apostle to start a church, that does not exclude those who are not apostles from starting a church. Certainly many churches have been started by someone other than an apostle. Often someone who simply has a burden for lost people will start a church. When we couple that burden with acts of faith God honors it.

As I have already stated, a denomination can act as your spiritual authority and overseer. I suggest you go to your pastor, or someone else in your leadership circle, and explain your burden to him or her. Take their counsel, continue to pray, and move through every door the Lord opens for you.

What if you are not connected with any denomination, but rather have affiliated yourself with an independent church? I have been in, and preached in, many fine independent churches that the Lord has not placed in a denomination.

However, I believe strongly that every church should be under spiritual authority and oversight. There is an organization here in the US called Master Builders which was started by an apostle with the vision of being a loose oversight organization for independent churches. Many existing independent churches have joined Master Builders and they also are sending out pastors to plant new churches. It is working very well. The independent pastors and church leaders come together for prayer, fellowship, to share ideas, and to affirm the direction of their individual churches. This is so necessary. It is a very strong safeguard against the enemy trying to pull a church in the wrong direction.

So let me encourage you that if you are part of the leadership of an independent church, look around and ask the Lord to join you with a group of fellow ministers with whom you can be in fellowship and have as a covering. Of course, if you are

thinking of planting a church but have not yet done so, it is doubly important that you find some overseers who are godly, mature Christians who will work with you and guide you.

Leadership Skills

The Lord gives leadership skills to those whom He directs to plant churches. Leadership is the ability to inspire others to action. Those with leadership have the ability to attract and inspire others, and to motivate group human effort toward a common goal. A leader also has the ability to read people, determine their strengths and weaknesses, and then place them in the exact organizational position to best use those strengths.

Leadership skills are essential for every person, apostle or not, who is founding and/or building up a church. Peter demonstrated this kind of leadership when, on the day of Pentecost, he stood, began to speak and thereby took control of the crowd. Of course, Paul also demonstrated great leadership in Philippi, Ephesus, and other places through his preaching and church building. (Please note that leadership skills in varying degrees are common to all of the five-fold ministries.)

Laying the Spiritual Foundation of a Church

Every person, apostle, pastor, or whomever, who plants a church, must understand the absolute necessity of laying a proper spiritual foundation for that church. Churches should be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (Eph 2:20 NIV) Paul seems to doubly emphasize the importance of a proper spiritual foundation for he also wrote, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 3:9 NIV)

I cannot overemphasize the importance of a proper foundation. I have had the unfortunate experience of observing churches whose foundations were not properly set. Invariably they encounter disaster, most often in the form of doctrinal error. Usually such churches are born in the excitement of revival, or are built around the personality of a strong leader. In either case the numerical growth of the church exceeds the spiritual growth. As a result, proper doctrinal foundation stones are ignored. A true apostle or overseer will never permit this to happen in a church under his care, nor should anyone else who is in the position of church leadership.

A proper biblical foundation is especially important in the life of a new believer. And new believers will probably make up most of the congregation of a newly established church. If we do not lay a proper doctrinal foundation, or if we do it in a half-hearted manner, the new Christian is headed for trouble down the road in his or her spiritual walk. If you multiply these potential problems by 40, 60, or a 100 new converts, just imagine what will happen over the next few years to that church!

Let me illustrate this point by a recent experience I had. I was the guest speaker in a church and after the service, three men approached me asking my assistance in settling a doctrinal discussion they were having. Two of the men were solid, well-taught believers. The third was a new believer. The problem was that the new believer was dogmatically insisting that there were three separate Gods, the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

He refused to accept the idea of the Trinity that we Christians have held for centuries! This man was building his Christian house without a proper foundation. If he does not go back and submit to the basic teachings of the church, he will eventually fall into gross error. In fact, he is already half way there. Worse yet, suppose he is a very gifted leader who goes out and gathers a following and starts his own church! It's easy to see how so many of today's near-Christian cults get started.

Scripture has made clear how we are to lay spiritual foundations:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the *foundation of the apostles and prophets*, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22, emphasis added NIV.)

We see clearly in Paul's journeys that time and again after he had a number of converts he would stay for an extended period teaching the new converts. What he was doing was laying the spiritual foundation.

But again you may say, "I am starting a new church and I am not an apostle or prophet. What am I to do? Who is to lay the foundation for me?" Don't worry. Many apostles and prophets over the years have put their teachings into writing. And many denominations such as the Assemblies of God have excellent written material on the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Or most any good commentary Bible will teach these essential doctrines accurately. Thus, a pastor or teacher can lay a good foundation using the materials of the apostles and prophets.

Or, if you establish a new church without strong apostolic oversight, and if there are apostles and prophets *available* within your circle of churches, have them oversee the teaching. In this way the apostles and prophets are, in effect, laying the foundation. If the apostles and prophets are available to do the actual teaching, so much the better. The most important thing is that all new converts receive thorough instruction in the essential doctrines of the church.

In a new church, with mostly new believers, it should be done the same way Paul did it, by teaching and preaching. In an existing church, this is often done in what we call the "new believers' class." Unfortunately, many churches do not have such a class, or are very lax about new believers attending. I know of a few churches in which attendance to such a class is mandatory. If a person misses a class, he or she can make it up by listening to the audio tape of the missed class if possible or by getting a fellow class member's notes.

What topics should be taught in foundational classes? In my view the subjects taught are what I call essential doctrines, that is, the doctrines essential to the existence of Christianity. This list includes,

The virgin birth of Jesus
Blood atonement
The deity of Christ
The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus
The Trinity
The resurrection and judgment
The universal sinfulness of man
Salvation by grace through faith
The inerrancy of Scripture
The return of the Lord

Location of the Church Plant

I believe the Lord has a specific geographical area or location for every one of His churches. But as a rule, I don't think He has specific lots set aside for each and every church. This is not to say that He never leads church planters to a specific plot of ground. Sometimes He does. But in seeking the Lord in prayer, expect His leading to be to a neighborhood or general area. If He chooses to be more specific, praise Him for such specific direction!

There are also times when the Lord restrains or forbids entry into certain areas for reasons we may not understand. In Acts 16 we see these words:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. (vs 6,7 NIV)

The obvious message here is that we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If He leads you to a community, you have the right to expect Him to protect and provide for you. If you went without His leading, you are going to have a lot of problems!

Once you have settled on a location, you must select a meeting place and set a time for your service. You may start with just a few people, maybe only one or two families. Don't be discouraged. The test is obedience, not how many come the first Sunday or even the 50th Sunday.

There are two ways people come to a church. One way is by making converts from unbelievers. The other way is by gathering sheep from other flocks. I have seen many proud pastors displaying the sheep of their churches only to learn that most of them were already established Christians and that there were very few new converts.

This is not to say that a new church may not have sheep from other churches. There are legitimate reasons for someone to leave one church and go to another. What I am saying is this: in starting a new church, your goal should be to reach the lost, not just to have a growing church.

Now let's look at the primary way new converts are going to be gathered in from among the lost.

The Evangelism Phase

Along with establishing a place and time to meet, you must evangelize. Evangelism has always been the principal way new converts are won to Christ and it can be done in many different ways. Let's look at just a few.

1. Preaching

Open air or outdoor preaching is commonly used to reach the lost. The logic is simple: go where there are lost people and preach the gospel. We cannot expect the lost to come to our churches. Most don't even know they're lost!

In many countries buses are the most common method of transportation. Thus, there are often large concentrations of people at bus stops. It is quite common to see a preacher or an evangelist preaching the gospel at a bus stop. Any large concentration of people should be viewed as a target for evangelistic preaching. Look for places like markets, village squares, busy

streets, and so forth. Use your divinely inspired imagination. God will give you ideas.

Some years ago Carolyn and I were in a large church in the Philippines. The pastor began to make announcements about the "bus ministry." We look at each other wondering, "How can this poor church afford *buses*?" knowing that buses cost many thousands of dollars each. Later that day we asked the pastor what he was talking about when he said "bus ministry." We were surprised, pleased and amused at his answer. Buses are the principal means of transport in the Philippines. The church gives their young people a small amount of money for a bus ticket, then sends them out to ride a bus. The young Christian gets the driver's permission and preaches the gospel from the front of the bus! That is creative. That is effective, and it is an excellent way to train young preachers!

Go where the lost are and preach the gospel!

2. Videos and Films

There are many films on the life of Jesus which are available today. They are in many languages. A friend of mine has a film on the life of Jesus that was filmed in India with *no white people in the film!*⁽¹⁾ He has it in several of the most common dialects in India. Teams of people are taking the film to thousands of villages in India where many of the people have never seen a movie or TV. They hang a large white cloth in the village square and show the film. The entire village comes out to see it.

People who had never before heard the name "Jesus" openly weep when they see Him crucified. They stand and cheer and shout when He is resurrected from the dead! After the film the team holds an altar call. They are experiencing thousands of converts using this film. Sometimes 25 - 30 percent of the village receives Jesus as Savior! Their major problem is that they don't have enough pastors to shepherd the thousands of converts.

3. Personal Witnessing, Tracts and Mime

Another effective way of gaining converts is by training people to personally witness. I know a brother whose sole ministry is personal witnessing and training others to witness. They go to public events, to recreational beaches, into bars. . . any place their imagination takes them to witness for Jesus. If people are properly trained, this is a very effective way of bringing people to the Lord.

I have heard many testimonies from Christians who accepted Jesus through reading a tract. This is a highly effective way of spreading the gospel. Once I was with a group of talented young people who would watch for the coming of a sporting event or movie and write a tract relating to the event. They would then attend the event and hand out their custom designed tracts. Such tracts, if well done, are highly effective.

Other young people use mime to portray an aspect of the gospel, presenting the mime in public places. While the presentation is in progress, other workers are among the crowd looking for people with whom to share Jesus.

4. Bible Studies

Going into homes in your targeted community and holding Bible studies is another highly effective way to evangelize. People who would never listen to a street evangelist, attend a church, or read a tract, will often respond to a neighbor's invitation to his or her home. I personally know of many such Bible studies that grew into churches and *almost every person was a new convert!*

Using someone's home for the Bible study is not necessary. You can use hotel meeting rooms or community halls. For a new outreach into a community it may be important that the meeting place not be in a church. That can put a barrier in the minds of some unbelievers. They cannot separate your meeting from the church and look on your meeting as if it were an extension of the church whose building you are using. They need to hear about Jesus, not about the denomination of the church building.

In Part II we will continue our examination of ways to evangelize as well as look at the process of moving a group of new believers into a vibrant, mature body of Christians.

Let us end as we began, by looking at the Antioch church ". . . the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." (Act 13:2-3 NIV)

Lord, may we be as faithful as the church of Antioch!

1. Not available outside India nor in English.

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Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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