

Church Planting: A Theological Perspective

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a Theological Perspective

By Tim Chester From *Multiplying Churches*, ed. Stephen Timmis, (Christian Focus, 2000).

I well remember my first experience of church planting. We met in the village hall on Sunday mornings for a forty-five minute sermon and in the evenings in a home to pray together and encourage one another. And then the 'plant' became a 'church' and that meant two 'services' in the village hall. Out went the corporate prayer and mutual encouragement; in came another forty-five minute sermon. Everyone said how they missed the evening meeting in a home, but no-one thought for a moment that it might be possible to continue it. A church - a proper church - has two services on a Sunday.

1. The doctrine of the church and church planting

At what point does a plant become a church? Must a church have two Sunday meetings? Is finding a building a necessary stage in church planting? Your view of what a church is and what it does (ecclesiology) has a profound impact on your approach to church planting. It affects whether you support church planting. It affects how you go about it. But church planting also has the potential to renew our thinking about church.

1.1 The impact of ecclesiology on church planting

In Acts 2 Luke describes the church of Jerusalem in the following way:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

Arguably for Luke this description is a programmatic statement of what it means to be the church. The statement may not be definitive. A fuller statement would need to be informed by the rest of the New Testament and make links back to the people of God in the Old Testament. Nevertheless it allows us to ask how such a definition might shape our approach to church planting. Pastor, building, sermons, membership role, constitution - implicitly these shape the image of church for many people. But do they define what it means to be church? Here the challenge is not just to do the theological thinking, but to have the imagination to strip away the traditional or denominational baggage from our images of church. Taking Luke's description of the apostolic church as to some extent defining of church is not problematic per se until you allow it to shape your ministry. Ask

when a church plant becomes a church and people's functional definitions of church are often revealed. Is it when a launch takes place? Is it when a constitution is agreed? Is it when leaders are appointed? Or is it, as Luke's definition might suggest, when the church planting team first gathers?

1.2 The impact of church planting on ecclesiology

But not only does our view of church affect our approach to church planting, church planting has the potential to renew our view of church. Unless we are prepared to work from definitions that are biblically and theologically informed, church plants run the risk of being clones - copies of sending churches. Unless we recognise this danger, church planting may in fact reduce missionary activity as smaller churches struggle to ape the programmes of larger churches. Sometimes such cloning is laughable - like the church planter who held a traditional service with just his family, including four hymns, a sermon and taking up an offering. Always it is a missed opportunity.

The challenge for church planters is ... to give birth to new forms of the church rather than replicate the same structures that have already failed elsewhere. Church planting offers the opportunity to explore what it means for the church to become a genuinely mission church with new responses to the challenges of a culture which has proved to be highly resistant to the message of the gospel in the twentieth century. (Robinson and Christine, 1992:9; see also pp. 30-33)

Church planting is an opportunity to re-invent church along radical biblical lines. Much of the New Testament demonstrates that this was so even within the first generation of the church. It was the experience of planting churches among the Gentiles that led to the crucial gathering in Jerusalem (Acts 15). It forced the church to recognise the radical implications of the death and resurrection of the Messiah for their understanding of salvation and the people of God.

There is a lesson here from the experience of mission. When the gospel first enters a culture, the contrast between the gospel and that culture is usually stark. Over time, however, the church not only affects the surrounding culture, it also accommodates to it. Through mission the church breaks free from external conformity to culture and internal conformity to tradition and rediscovers the vitality of the gospel. Church planting is vital for the health of the wider church. Good church planting forces us to re-ask questions about the gospel and church; to re-invent churches that are both biblical without religious tradition and relevant without worldly conformity.

There need be no second generation churches if the church is constantly re-configuring itself through church planting. Second generation Christians are those without their own living experience of the gospel. Second generation churches are those who have lost their gospel cutting edge. It may be that a fiftieth church anniversary is not an occasion to celebrate the faithfulness of God, but to lament the stagnation of his people. Far from weakening a sending church, church planting is a vital opportunity to re-focus the life of the church on the gospel. The identity of the sending church should radically change - it

cannot continue as the same church. It can no longer simply repeat its programme. It will look again for new leaders to emerge. It has to ask all over again how it will reach its neighbourhood with the gospel.

Summary

- a failure to think biblically about the church will stifle church planting
- good church planting should renew our understanding of the church and the gospel
- there need be no second generation churches if the church is constantly re-configuring itself through church planting

2. The centrality of the church in the purposes of God

Traditionally many evangelicals have had a somewhat individualistic view of the Christian faith. While the accusation that evangelicals have no ecclesiology is too simplistic, by making a personal relationship with God its touchstone, evangelical theology has struggled to give the communion of God's people the importance it receives in the biblical narrative. The individualism of modernity re-enforces this. And while those of a postmodern generation talk a lot about relationships, they are usually reluctant to make long-term commitments, especially to inter-generational relationships. As a result a loose view of church is endemic in our congregations - a fact revealed, for example, in the ease with which people change congregations or the infrequency of church discipline.

The sin of Adam was not an individual affair. In Adam all mankind sinned. Mankind collectively rebelled against God and is at enmity with God. But God in his mercy determined to create a new humanity. The promise to Abraham that determines the shape of redemptive history is the promise of a people and a land. It is a promise that finds fulfilment in the new humanity in the new creation. At the heart of God's plan of salvation are a family and a nation. God's purposes are not focused on many unrelated individuals, but upon his people.

In the New Testament those promises find their fulfilment in those who are 'in Christ', in the church. The church is the new Israel, the holy nation. Christ died for the elect, for his bride, for the church. The church is not an ad hoc collection of those individuals who have come to know God - a kind of by-product of individual salvation. Quite the opposite: individuals are saved insofar as they become part of the people of God by grace through faith. The church is not simply an historic convenience - a useful way of organising discipleship and mission. The bride of Christ - complete and perfect - is at the heart of the climax of salvation. Wherever you look in the biblical narrative God's people are at the heart of what God is doing.

God's purposes are not only to redeem a people for himself, but also to reconcile them with one another. The fall of mankind not only led to alienation from God, but also from

others. But in Christ the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down (Ephesians 2:11-22). Across barriers of race, sex and class, Christians are united in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The cross is the objective ground for this and the Spirit is the subjective ground. We celebrate this oneness with each other in communion (1 Corinthians 10:17). We are urged to make every effort to maintain it (Ephesians 4:1-6).

The unity of the church is a foretaste of God's purposes for all creation (Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 2:19-22). Through the incorporation of the Gentiles and the creation of the one people of God, God's eternal plan to reconcile all things under Christ is made manifest to the rulers and authorities (Ephesians 3:1-11). God's great plan of reconciliation is realised now in the church. The church is the place where God reigns in peace and justice.

The church is the focus of God's saving purposes. The church is the bride for whom Christ died and whom God will glorify. This is not of mere academic interest. The place one gives to the church in your theology will affect the place one gives it in mission. If the individual is at the heart of God's purposes then it is natural to place the individual at the heart of mission. But if the church is at the heart of God's purposes and Christ's saving work, we need not be embarrassed about making it the heart of mission.

Summary

- the church is central to the purposes of God
- in salvation God reconciles us to one another in the community of the church
- while church planting is not the only way of doing mission, mission cannot take place apart from the church

3. The Centrality of the Congregation in the Mission of God

So far we have used the term 'church' in a generic sense. But does the centrality of the church equate to the centrality of the congregation? To be a Christian is, by definition, to be part of the community of God's people. To be united with Christ is to be part of his body. The assumption of the New Testament is that this always finds expression in commitment to a local church. Local communities provide the context for discipleship in the New Testament. Indeed much of Jesus' teaching on discipleship only makes sense in the context of community (see Mark 10:17-31 where those who leave all to follow Christ receive much more 'in this present age' as well as the age to come as they share the family and possessions of the Christian community). To be part of Christ's body is to be part of a local church. The centrality of the church means the centrality of the congregation or it means nothing. Commitment to the church is easy while the church is an abstract, universal reality. But the New Testament assumes commitment to real people in real local churches with all their faults and foibles.

While it may be important to talk about the universal church, the experience of church is always rooted in local church. (On Paul's use of the terms of 'church' and 'churches' see Banks, 1980:33-52 and O'Brien, 1982) And therefore, if church is central to the purposes of God, the local congregation must be central to the experience of mission. There cannot be mission apart from the local church. The local church is the agent of mission. It is the context in which people are discipled. The life of the Christian community is part of the gospel message of reconciliation. And the life of the Christian community is part of the way by which that message is communicated. The unity of the church alerts the world to the saving purposes of God (John 17:23). The new commandment and its implications for mission are meaningless apart from the Christian community (John 13:34-35). Mission takes place as people see our love for one another. And so there cannot be mission apart from concrete expressions of Christian community. Mission strategies that content themselves with the conversion of individuals miss both the centrality of the church in the saving purposes of God and the New Testament emphasis on the Christian community as the context in which discipleship takes place.

3.1 Stuart Murray

Stuart Murray, Oasis Director of Church Planting and Evangelism at Spurgeon's College, London, has made a significant contribution to our thinking about church planting in his book *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (1998). Nevertheless the theological framework for church planting which he outlines in the book amounts, in practice, to a qualification of church planting. He leans on David Bosch who, in his seminal work, *Transforming Mission*, argues that after the demise of Christendom a focus on church planting meant the church had 'ceased to point to God or to the future; instead, it was pointing to itself' (1991:332). To some extent both Murray and Bosch have in their sights church planting which is mere denominational expansionism. But Murray especially sets up some false polarities: between church planting and the mission of God and between church planting and the kingdom of God.

Modern thinking about mission uses the phrase *missio Dei* (the mission of God) to express the conviction that mission stems from the character and purposes of God rather than from human invention or programmes. But the same is true of the church. The church is not a human invention or institution (or at least it should not be), but reflects the triune character and saving purposes of God. To say we should point to God and not his church is a false distinction if God's purpose is to save a people for himself. That was the promise to Abraham and the fulfilment of that promise forms the unifying theme of the biblical narrative. Murray says, 'church planting is not an end in itself, because the church is an agent of God's mission' (1998:31-32). But what sense does that statement make if at the heart of the God's mission is the saving for himself of a people? Murray fears the neglect of social justice and cultural engagement if church planting is central. But the choice is not between church planting and social justice. The choice is between planting introverted churches and planting open, socially engaged churches.

Murray believes the kingdom qualifies church planting because he sees the kingdom as wider than the church. He asserts, without explanation, that the kingdom is an activity,

not a community. But the Greek word *basileia* refers both to 'rule' and to the 'realm' in which that rule is acknowledged. Jesus often talks in terms of entering the kingdom of God, but you cannot 'enter' an activity. The kingdom of God is the rule of God over a new humanity in a new creation. In its fullest sense it belongs to the future. But people enter the kingdom in the present as they submit to the rule of God and experience a foretaste of the blessings of his future reign ahead of time through the Holy Spirit.

The key reason Murray separates the kingdom from the church is because he separates the kingdom from the gospel. He says, for example, 'not infrequently, if we have eyes to see this, God is advancing his kingdom through those who may not recognise this but whose quest for justice and wholeness, for liberty and community, is contributing towards the kingdom's advance.' (1998:43). But, as the Matthean Great Commission makes clear, the rule of Christ is exercised through the gospel. In the gospel we call on people to submit to Christ, to obey all his teaching. The kingdom of God is the reassertion of God's rule over a world that had rebelled against him. This would inevitably mean judgment for all were it not for the secret coming of the kingdom in grace through Jesus the Messiah. The life-giving rule of God is present ahead of the end through the coming of the Messiah and then through his Spirit. The Spirit mediates the kingdom of God through the gospel of Christ so that Christ rules now by his word of eschatological promise.

God is sovereignly working throughout the world. This is what the Reformed tradition calls 'common grace'. But we should not call this the coming of the kingdom of God - God's sovereignty did not start with the incarnation. The 'kingdom of God' refers to the future rule of God that is present now through Spirit and the gospel. In other words, the church is the 'place' on earth where God rules and which anticipates, albeit imperfectly, the future kingdom of God which will encompass all creation. 'The church is the community of the kingdom in which Jesus is acknowledged as Lord of the universe and through which, in anticipation of the end, the kingdom is concretely manifested in history' (Padilla, 1984:17). It is the church that makes manifest the eternal reconciling purposes of God (Ephesians 3:1-11).

Extending his church-kingdom dichotomy, Murray says:

'Church planting that fails to engage with the mission agenda of Jesus can easily become church-centred rather than kingdom-oriented ... Church planting, or any other aspect of the mission of the church, cannot be pursued in isolation but must be related to the mission of Jesus. (Murray, 1998:35)

In one sense this is self-evident. Who is going to say we should not engage in the mission agenda of Jesus? But now the church-kingdom polarity has become a church-Jesus polarity. Murray argues that the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' ministry, but uses the term almost as a contrast to church. He contrasts the church-focus of the apostles with the kingdom-focus of Jesus. But the discontinuity is not so stark if you look beyond the relative absence of the word 'church' (*ekklesia*) in the gospels. The community of Jesus is central to his ministry. 'Jesus ... did not write a book but formed a community' (Newbigin,

1989:227). The community of Jesus is key to his strategy - he increasingly focuses his energy on his community of followers and especially the community of the twelve. It is at the heart of his theology - he saw the formation of a new Israel through his ministry. And it is a vital element of his ministry - especially the inclusion of sinners.

Consider again Bosch's criticism that the church had 'ceased to point to God or to the future; instead, it was pointing to itself' (1991:332). It is deceptively attractive, but runs contrary to biblical missiology. The heart of Old Testament mission is precisely the fact that by pointing to themselves as they embody life under the rule of God, the people of God draw attention to God himself (Deuteronomy 4:5-8; Bosch devotes only four pages of his great work of missiology to the Old Testament; Wright, 1996:37). The community life of God's people is central to mission. Jesus says, 'by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35). And Jesus prays, 'may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me' (John 17:23). This is not self-aggrandisement on the part of the church for its aim is the glorification of the Father (Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:11-12).

3.2 Lesslie Newbigin

Wrestling with the future of the faith in the profoundly secular context of Western Europe, the late Lesslie Newbigin argued that we need to reaffirm the centrality of the congregation in mission. He speaks of the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel (1989:222-233). It is neither possible nor desirable, he argues, to return to some form of Christendom. We must turn from the kind of power exercised by 'the rulers of the Gentiles' and accept the role of servanthood (Luke 22:25-26). But neither should we accept the role of winning souls to a discipleship concerned only with the private and domestic aspects of life. We cannot adopt a form of servanthood that means simply being at the disposal of others or responding to their aspirations. That would be to forsake the universal claim of the kingdom of God.

Newbigin looks to the pattern of Jesus who exercised the sovereignty of God's kingdom through servanthood. How is it possible for the church truly to represent the reign of God in the world in the way Jesus did? How can we combine his tender compassion and awesome sovereignty? The answer, he believes, lies in the local congregation.

I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel - evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. (1989:227)

Newbigin argues that in the local congregation Christians find 'the framework of understanding' which enables them to make sense of the world from a gospel perspective. The 'plausibility structure' of the Christian community enables believers to resist the pervasive false 'normality' of modernity. The gracious, gospel character of public activity is safeguarded from the tone of moral crusade through the congregation for the congregation lives in grateful remembrance for God's grace to us in Christ. The congregation provides a community in which the exercise of the service of the priesthood of believers to the world can be sustained and in which there can be mutual responsibility. The future of the gospel in our society does not lie in adopting particular evangelistic techniques, creating Christian political parties or pursuing propaganda campaigns, argues Newbigin.

It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. (1989:232-3)

Summary

- commitment to the people of God is expressed through commitment to specific congregations
- the Christian community embodies the good news of God's coming kingdom and so makes known the gospel to the world
- there cannot be sustainable Christian mission without sustainable local Christian communities

4. Church planting and the Mission of God

The centrality of the church in the purposes of God means the centrality of the congregation in the mission of God. But does that add up to a mandate for church planting? Must they be new congregations? Can we content ourselves with the congregations we have? To answer these questions we will consider two models of church planting.

But first we must briefly establish some hermeneutical principles. Those who acknowledge the authority of Scripture will clearly accept that the apostolic principles of church and mission are binding on us. Although there will be flexibility and diversity (as there was in the New Testament itself), we must be uncompromising in our commitment to give the fullest expression possible to apostolic principles. But while apostolic principles are binding, New Testament patterns - often expressed in narrative - are not binding. But this does not mean those New Testament patterns are irrelevant. We should expect them to guide our thinking because they reflect normative apostolic principles.

4.1 The Apostolic Mission was church planting

Within New Testament practice there are two models of church planting. One arises from New Testament missiology; the other from New Testament ecclesiology. But the distinction should not be drawn too sharply for what we discover is that the church is at the heart of New Testament missiology and mission is at the heart of New Testament ecclesiology.

Peter Wagner identifies twelve models of contemporary church planting from hiving off a section of an existing congregation to an independent 'apostolic' church planter (1990). Martin Robinson and David Spriggs list ten (1995). But they all divide their lists into two categories: those in which church planting takes place apart from an existing local congregation and those in which one congregation gives birth to another. This categorisation broadly equates to the two models found in the New Testament.

The first is the model adopted by Paul in which a church planting team plants a church where no churches previously existed. In what sense does this practice reflect New Testament missiology? For Paul mission meant planting churches. In the New Testament wherever the gospel was preached local churches were established. In Acts Luke deliberately portrays Paul as a church planter.

This methodology involves a church planting team or apostolic band. The team functions as a church even as a church grows up around it, providing a context for discipleship and a demonstration of Christian community.

There is a case for calling such church planters 'apostles' in some sense. In Acts 14:14, for example, Barnabas is described as an 'apostle' even though he was not among the foundational twelve (Ephesians 2:20) plus Paul (see also Romans 16:7). In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul defines his apostleship both in terms of his vision of the risen Christ and his work as a church planter. The term 'apostle' may carry too much contemporary baggage to be recovered. What is clear is that apostolic mission was church planting.

4.2 The Apostolic Churches were reproducing churches

The second church planting model is not so much a pattern for church planting per se as for normative New Testament church life. The apostolic churches were reproducing household churches (Tidball, 1983:79-86; Banks, 1980:33-42).

The apostolic churches met in homes - probably the homes of wealthy church members or more humble apartment blocks (Osiek and Balch, 1997:5-35). Not until the middle of the second century were homes specially adapted for Christian gatherings. Only later still were Christian buildings purpose built - largely to replicate pagan temples after Constantine made Christianity the civil religion of the Roman Empire (Blue, 1999). In the apostolic period churches met in homes.

Whatever the reasons for this, it meant they grew by adding further household gatherings rather than by adding numbers to one mega-congregation. So, for example, Paul writes 'to the church of God in Corinth' (1 Corinthians 1:2), but can also talk about information

from 'some from Chloe's household' and how he baptised the members of 'the household of Stephanas ... the first converts in Achaia' (1 Corinthians 1:11,16; 16:15). (Note also Romans 1:7; 16:3,5,10-11; Philippians 4:22; Colossians 4:15-16; Philemon 1:1-2.)

The apostolic churches were reproducing household churches because that is how they were established. The household was central to the model of the apostolic church planting team. In Acts 16 Lydia and the jailer's 'households' are baptised and a church is planted in Philippi. In Acts 18 the household of Crispus believes and a church is planted in Corinth. In contrast in Acts 17 'a few' in Athens believe, but we are not told of a household that believes. Could this be why it appears no church was planted?

Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 1:16 that he baptised the members of the household of Stephanas. So in his time in Corinth Paul must have overseen the establishment of a number of household churches within the city. The point is that he chose to establish a number of smaller churches rather than create one large congregation. In Ephesus Paul uses the hall of Tyrannus, but for public discussions. Meanwhile he teaches the believers 'from house to house' (Acts 20:20).

Today in Central Asia missionaries aim to see a household converted so they can form the basis of a new indigenous church. In one Central Asian town a number of individuals had been saved. The missionaries particularly asked for prayer that the husband of one of the believers, who is showing interest in the gospel, might be saved. Their prayer was not only that he might be saved, but that as a result a church might be established. It is a strategy that appears to reflect the practice of the apostle Paul.

Paul planted household churches that would continue his mission by being missionary churches. Church planting was built into their nature. Paul planted churches as a bridgehead into a city. The churches he planted would reach that city by continually by adding further household congregations.

Constantly reproducing churches was the pattern of apostolic churches, but it was a pattern that gave fullest expression to the principles of Christian community. The household model is in some way defining of church. The church is the household of God (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 4:17). The ability of a potential leader to manage his household reflects his ability to care for God's church (1 Timothy 3:4-5). For New Testament Christians the idea of 'church' was synonymous with household and home. The false teachers on Crete at Ephesus 'must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach' (Titus 1:11; cf. 1 Timothy 5:13). And if a false teacher comes, John says, 'do not take him into your house or welcome him' (2 John 10). In both Titus and 2 John the most natural reading of the text is as a reference to local household churches.

The point is not a slavish adherence to homes as the location for church gatherings or a denial of the value that purpose-built buildings can sometimes bring. The point is that the household model of New Testament practice embodies key apostolic principles. The

apostolic churches chose to divide rather than grow beyond what could be accommodated in a home to safeguard apostolic principles of church life.

Household determines a size in which mutual discipleship and care can realistically take place. It creates a simplicity that militates against the maintenance mentality: there are no expensive buildings to maintain or complex programmes to run. It determines a style that is participatory and inclusive, mirroring the discipleship model and table fellowship of Jesus himself. It was no accident or force of circumstance that the church of the New Testament met as household groups - this was the best way to 'do' church.

One of the key expressions of New Testament ecclesiology is 'one another' (sometimes translated 'each other'). This is often missed, perhaps unsurprisingly, by academic theology. It is simply the practical expression of the priesthood of all believers. Whatever flexibility there might be about the structure of church, these principles are binding. We disciple and exhort one another. We must care for one another. We must use and develop the gifts of all. Our communal life must proclaim the sending of Christ by the Father. And that means our structures must be geared to making these things happen.

In other words, the church in the New Testament grew by dividing, not by building larger auditoriums. If this statement is true - and it seems self-evident from a *prima facie* reading of the New Testament - it has profound implications for our view of church growth. A vision for church growth must be a vision for church planting.

Many of the advantages of size could be gained through the co-operative activities of a network of smaller churches. The early household churches may well have met with one another. (Robert Banks argues that the household churches of Corinth met together whereas the household churches of Rome probably did not; 1980:37-40.) But the core unit was the household. Many are unenthusiastic about church planting because of assumptions that big is better. But the household model of New Testament practice was no accident. It enabled the fullest possible expression of New Testament principles. Mutuality - teaching, exhorting, caring for one another - can flourish in the family atmosphere of a small group. The priesthood of all believers finds expression when no person's contribution gets lost in the crowd. Home is a powerful dynamic for evangelism: the grace of God is powerfully embodied around an inclusive meal table as it was in Jesus' own ministry (Bartchy, 1992).

The New Testament pattern of church life implies a regular transplanting of churches into new homes. This creates a missionary dynamic in which new leaders can emerge and the church can re-invent itself. Church planting is part of normal church life. At present it carries a certain mystique; church planters more so. We need to create a culture in which, at the very least, transplanting is normal. Every local church should be aiming to transplant. Every local church should be raising up church planters.

Why should churches who have struggled to grow to fifty or a hundred strong consider planting or transplanting? Why go back? The answer is that without church planting it will be harder to give expression to the New Testament principles of mutual care and the

priesthood of all believers. The church either lives by mission or dies in comfort. Dividing a large church may well mean more effort and struggle, but inactivity and comfort are not biblical norms for discipleship.

And this means we should not fear risk or failure. That church plants fail does not mean we should give up church planting any more than Simon Magus means we should give up preaching the gospel (Acts 8).

The kingdom of God has not been given to those who wield political influence or who run national evangelistic campaigns or who receive media attention. The kingdom of God has been given to Christ's 'little flock' (Luke 12:32).

Summary

- where no local churches exist, mission must have planting churches at its heart
- the apostolic churches were reproducing household churches
- small, household churches allowed full expression of the apostolic principles of mutual care, involvement and discipleship
- church planting is part of normal church life

5. A Final Word

It is sometimes said that those committed to church planting fall into two camps. There are those whose primary concern is with mission and who see church (in the form of church planting) as the most biblical or most convenient way to pursue their commitment to mission. The primary concern of the other group is the church. They see mission (in the form of church planting) as the best way to pursue their radical vision of the church.

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul reflects on what makes for good church planting (it is from this chapter that the expression 'church planting' comes). And the key thing is that the gospel is at the heart of church planting. The Corinthian church plants had lost sight of the gospel. They were concerned with human power and wisdom. They were dividing over secondary issues. Paul puts the gospel of Christ crucified back at the heart of church and church planting.

Those whose primary commitment is to evangelism can too easily get locked into pragmatism. The literature on church planting abounds with prescriptive techniques and procedures. Detailed plans are offered from forming a team through to holding a public launch and beyond. Paul reminds us of the sufficiency of the gospel of Christ crucified. People are saved and the church built through the sovereign grace of God and the power of the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). We should be careful that what we build rests on the true foundation of the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). It is God who 'makes things grow' (1 Corinthians 3:7).

Those whose primary concern is church can too easily get absorbed with the internal dynamics or structures of the church. Getting the church community life right becomes the priority. Paul reminds us of the centrality of the gospel. Our great desire should be for gospel growth. Only gospel work will survive the fires of judgment (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Summary

- church planting is vital for mission. It puts the church at the centre of mission - reflecting the centrality of the church in the purposes of God. It offers the normative context for discipleship and is itself a 'hermeneutic of the gospel'
- church planting is vital for the church. It enables the church to reinvent itself - to rethink biblical principles and apply them anew to their cultural and historical contexts. It forces us to put the gospel back at the centre of church life

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