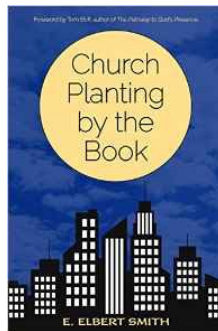


# CHURCH PLANTING BY THE BOOK

by Elbert Smith



Reviewed by Justin White  
Missionary #NoPlaceLeftRDU

## Introduction & Purpose

Elbert Smith pastored in the United States for thirteen years and has also served in Latin America and South Asian for thirteen years. Since 2004 he has directed the International Mission Board's (IMB) Field Personnel Orientation. In the Foreword, Tom Elliff, past president of the International Mission Board, asserts, "If I could have only one book on church planting, (other than the Scriptures, of course) this would be the book I would choose (9-10)." This is a strong claim considering the recent increase of books on church planting.

A renewed vision and zeal for church planting among evangelical Christians in recent years has been refreshing. This shift, however, has led to a plethora of resources and opinions seeking to offer future church planters the best practices for successful church planting. These methodologies often differ greatly depending on the context in which the missionary lives. While context certainly plays a role in church planting strategy, there must be a simple and reproducible foundation whether one is in the United States, West Africa, or South Asian.

In *Church Planting by the Book*, Smith targets church planters and churches that are seeking to plant churches where there are none. He argues, "In order for us to lay a foundation for how to plant the first church in a churchless city, we must turn to the New Testament, and primarily to the book of Acts (10)." The purpose of *Church Planting by the Book* is to lay a foundation for planting churches by examining common threads and unique insights found in the nine definite church plants in the New Testament including: Jerusalem, Antioch, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus (12). Smith defines common threads as, "Those principles and patterns that we see repeated in many of the church plants in the book of Acts which church planters today can emulate (12)." He also insists that we can gain unique insights from particular occurrences that took place in various church plants in Acts (12). The next section will examine several of Smith's common threads and unique insights and provide a brief summary of the content of the book.

## **Content**

### The Jerusalem Church: Acts 1:9-2:41

Due to the wealth of insight gained from the Jerusalem Church, Smith devotes two chapters to examining this church. In Chapter One, the author notes that the first church planted in the New Testament was born in the wake of a prayer meeting (15). Smith points out that the Jerusalem Church began with 120 disciples unified in prayer who were expected God to move. After the church was started, its leaders and members devoted themselves to prayer. They prayed for boldness, healing, direction, perseverance, and the spread of the Gospel. Often we are too busy (even with ministry) for corporate prayer, or when we do gather for prayer, our focus is on ourselves and not the advancement of the Gospel.

From the church in Jerusalem, Smith also discusses the foundational role of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:4 Luke tells us that they were all "filled with the Holy Spirit." Smith convincingly argues, "The normal sign of being filled with the Spirit is speaking the Word of God with boldness (21)." If this is true, we must ask ourselves how often we speak the Word of God with boldness to those far from God? In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus makes it clear that His power and presence (Holy Spirit) are given to those who are making disciples.

Smith is helpful when he delineates between broad seed sowing and evangelism. The Jerusalem Church engaged first in broad seed sowing as they spoke with lost people about God and His Word. He notes that this is good preparation for evangelism, however, if we fail to talk about the cross, resurrection, repentance, and faith, the Gospel has not been proclaimed (25). Our struggle to plant churches in America could possibly be related to our proclivity to neglect broad seed sowing and to find ways around one-on-one evangelism. The Jerusalem Church is a sobering reminder that without a commitment to both of these neglected activities church planting is not possible.

In Chapter Two, Smith argues that the Jerusalem Church gives us a model of a healthy church (33). He points out five major characteristics of the first church including: discipleship, fellowship, worship, ministry, evangelism and missions (33). Smith believes that these characteristics are found in all nine of the church plants in the New Testament. He links the health of each church to its ability to multiply disciples and churches. Many churches today would describe themselves as healthy, yet they are not multiplying disciples and churches among the lost. Smith's simple definition of a healthy church from Acts 2 is refreshing and helps remove obstacles to church planting put in place by others who attempt to define what a healthy church is based on tradition and context, rather than Scripture.

## The Church In Antioch: Acts 8:1-13:4

The Church in Antioch was planted by ordinary believers from Jerusalem who were fleeing persecution. Smith makes the point, "Church planting, in the book of Acts, is not just for missionaries or pastors. Church planting is for any Christian (53)." While education and preparation for church planting are good, could it be that we are placing too much emphasis and spending too many resources to prepare church planters? With that said, it would have been helpful for Smith to explain that while any believer *can* plant a church, there are some individuals, like Paul, who are called and gifted to do so at a higher capacity. Every believer is commanded to make disciples, not necessarily to plant churches.

Paul and Barnabas spent a year teaching and meeting with the Church in Antioch. Here, Smith makes the point, "The level of discipleship must match the level of evangelism (58)." Church planters must avoid spending too little or too much time discipling new believers and passing leadership on to local believers. Knowing the right time to leave will be contingent upon the sending church, the missionary team, prayer, fasting, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and avoiding dependency.

Another foundational difference in the Church at Antioch is that instead of receiving financial support from the mother church in Jerusalem, they sent money to Jerusalem during their time of need. Smith identifies this as a consistent pattern in the New Testament (60). In America we have turned this practice on its head. Parent churches often create dependency and allow church plants to survive, rather than letting them die, without aggressively seeking to make disciples from the harvest.

Finally, the Church at Antioch, despite their size, was committed to multiplication from the beginning. How many new church plants do we know that would have released Paul and Barnabas so quickly? Smith writes, "This example suggests that a church that is sensitive to the Holy Spirit, even a church that is relatively new, will be involved in sending out missionaries (62)."

#### The Church In Pisidian Antioch: Acts 13:13-52

Perhaps the most important observation from this plant is Paul and Barnabas' commitment to person of peace evangelism. In the Gospels, Jesus sent his disciples to new places and taught them to believe that God has already prepared some in that place to receive the message (73). Smith believes Paul and Barnabas used this same strategy in Pisidian Antioch. Their time there was limited because of persecution so they had to trust the Spirit to provide and grow the persons of peace that they found in the town. Whether we are in a rural village that has never heard the Gospel or in a city in the US, we must trust that God has prepared people there to respond to the Gospel and to be missionaries in their particular community.

#### The Church In Iconium: Acts 14:1-23

On a follow-up visit to Iconium, Paul and his team appointed elders from within every church (83). While the missionary certainly has a role to play in putting the initial leaders in place, Paul was clear that it was the Holy Spirit who had made them elders, and it would be the Holy Spirit that would help them grow as leaders (83). Another potential reason why church planting may be so slow in the US is because there is a leadership bottleneck. We often require much more training than Paul did before we are willing to release authority to potential leaders.

### The Church In Lystra: Acts 14:8-28

In Smith's discussion of the Church in Lystra, he makes an important observation when he states, "The New Testament uses the word "apostle" to refer to others outside the group of the twelve apostles (91)." In fact, Barnabas, as well as Paul, is called an "apostle." James, the half-brother of Jesus, Adronicus, and Junias are also referred to as "apostles" (91). Smith strengthens his case by pointing out that the word "apostle," meaning sent-out ones, or messengers, is used 78 times in the New Testament, and in only 47 of those uses it is referring to the twelve apostles (91). Smith suggests that the office of apostle may be a gift given by the Holy Spirit to some in the body of Christ (91). He is also helpful in pointing out that the Great Commission was given to all believers, but sent-out ones go where the gospel is not (92). As the US becomes more secular and as unreached people groups flock to our country, the church would do well to recognize and support, apostles in our context.

### The Church In Philippi: 15:36-16:34

Paul, the greatest missionary the church has known, came from the harvest. Smith is helpful in pointing out that future church planters are in the harvest (51). After separating from Barnabas over a dispute concerning John Mark, Paul begins to multiply his influence in raising up laborers by forming a new team with Silas and eventually Timothy. Paul and Silas face closed doors and persecution in Philippi, yet the Lord uses these struggles to lead them to Lydia and the jailer, both of whom are persons of peace. Church planters must search for laborers in the harvest, and when they find them they must train them by taking them on mission, even if it is risky.

### The Church In Thessalonica: Acts 17:1-15

In this chapter, Smith draws attention to Paul's flexibility (116). Paul had a plan when he entered into a town, yet he realized that God was his ultimate guide. Paul did not idolize his schedule or his comfort over the work of the Lord. Smith writes, "The church planter must be willing to adjust his or her personal preferences to the opportunities that come to evangelize and disciple people, night and day (123)." While schedules are necessary and helpful, church planting cannot be scheduled. This can be a difficult adjustment for those of us attempting to plant churches in the US. Yet without this flexibility we will miss many opportunities for ministry.

### The Church In Corinth: Acts 18:1-22

In Corinth, Paul made tents to support his ministry and to establish credibility in the community (134). Although he worked, he maintained his focus on his mission. He used the Sabbath for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting (134). Once he received support from Macedonia, he focused full time on church planting (133). Sent-out ones must be willing to work if need be, but they can never forsake the mission which God has called them to whether they are working or not.

### The Church In Ephesus: Acts 18:23-20:38

In Ephesus, after three years, Paul could confidently say, "All who lived in Asia heard the Word of the Lord (149)." How did this happen? Smith points out that Paul spent two years at a school (Tyrannus) training new disciples of Jesus. It appears that Paul did not only teach the new

believers, but rather trained them to walk in obedience to the commands of Jesus (147). Paul knew he would eventually leave, so he poured out himself each day to help the new disciples become the missionaries in Ephesus, rather than himself.

## **Evaluation & Recommendation**

### Strengths:

First, Elbert Smith undoubtedly accomplishes his stated purpose in writing this book. *Church Planting by the Book* lays a simple and solid foundation for church planting methodology from the Bible. This work is biblically and theologically sound. He wisely resists the temptation to be original and recognizes that originality can be unprofitable when attempting to establish a foundation for church planting based on the Bible. One will not find Smith's personal opinions scattered through the pages of this work. Instead, he is careful to allow the Bible to speak for itself. Each page is filled with a plethora Biblical quotes and references.

Next, this book offers simple and reproducible strategy for any follower of Christ with a passion to plant churches. It is very accessible and practical and removes much of the complexity and professionalism of church planting that have become obstacles for many who desire to plant churches. One could read this book and immediately begin implementing some of the strategies. The Epilogue provides a concise summary of the common threads and insights that Smith examines in his book.

Finally, *Church Planting by the Book* is 187 pages. Smith does not add extra material that is not pertinent to his thesis. The brevity of the book enhances its effectiveness and accessibility. It is an easy read which can be completed in a matter of days. While many books are too long and say more than they need to say, Smith stays focused on the task at hand.



## Weaknesses

First, in the Introduction, Smith describes his audience for this work as international church planters or US based churches desiring to plant churches among unreached people groups overseas. He unnecessarily limits his audience from the start, especially considering that later on in the book he suggests that any follower of Christ can be involved in church planting. He should go ahead and make the point that church planting is open to every follower of Christ, and the principles mined out of the Scriptures in this book are applicable to church planters in every context. While Smith is correct in saying that these principle should guide the way we engage in pioneer church planting, he misses an opportunity to appeal to those planting churches in contexts where the church has been established for centuries.

Next, while Smith lays out a compelling purpose and accomplishes this purpose in *Church Planting by the Book*, his original thesis is general and lacks intrigue. A church planter in the United States could skim the Introduction of *Church Planting by the Book* and determine that the book is not written for his context. In reality this would be a great mistake, because this book has the potential to greatly challenge and impact the way churches are planted in the US. Smith should go after the elephant in the room in his thesis. Many of the principles discussed in this book are ignored by North American church planters and sending agencies. Church planting methodology internationally is radically different than it is in the US, and this book has the power to challenge and change this. Instead, Smith is content with examining principles and simply "priming the pump" (14), when he should be challenging the way we plant churches. His book is profound and powerful enough to shake the foundation of North American church planting methodology.

Despite these weaknesses, *Church Planting by the Book* is a must read for everyone who has ever contemplated planting a church whether overseas or in the US. In fact in the long run, the book may bear the most fruit in North America. This reviewer agrees with Elliff's bold endorsement in the Foreword. If an individual had to choose one book on church planting, besides the Bible, this would undoubtedly be the one.