



Global Church Planting, Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication

Ott, Craig & Gene Wilson

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Reviewed by: Mikel Neumann

Wow! This book seems to have it all. Has there ever been so much written in one volume about the various aspects of church planting? Just holding the volume in my hand was a bit intimidating. Nearly everyone who has written about church planting in recent years is either quoted or alluded to in this work. OK so I was a little overwhelmed in the beginning. However, I took heart, began at the beginning and soldiered through. Below are my thoughts as I read.

Summary with comments

The authors state that, “Our primary goal is to combine sound biblical principles with the best practices from around the world to provide a practical guide for church planters working in a wide variety of cultural contexts.” (p. x) They certainly succeeded. Part I comprising chapters 1 through 3 gives the biblical data relevant to church planting: chapter 1: The Task of Church Planting, chapter 2: The Reasons for Church Planting, and chapter 3: New Testament Beginnings. I appreciate that they begin with the Scriptures with an emphasis on the fact that church planting is a spiritual work.

Early in chapter 1 they seek to define the essence of “church.” This is not your theologically succinct definition but rather a description garnered from the New Testament text. I appreciate that approach which maintains theological integrity yet allows for cultural or social distinctions. One of the admitted weaknesses of many church planters has been their ecclesiology. These early chapters will help a practitioner work through this issue.

Following the biblical description of church, the next definition is that of church planting, worth quoting here. “*Church planting is that ministry which through evangelism and discipleship establishes reproducing kingdom communities of believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to fulfilling biblical purposes under local spiritual leaders.*” (Italics theirs. p. 8) The rest of chapter 1 exegetes this definition which carries the reader into chapter 2 and on into 3, The Reasons for Church Planting and New Testament Beginnings.

Chapter 2 focuses on both biblical and philosophical reasons for church planting. While I do not think anyone reading this book would need convincing, this chapter gives some structure to a church planting passion. The chapter ends with a sort of caution in planting churches in places where churches already exist. It is not a warning against the practice, but simply states some good practices. Most of the book deals more with pioneer church planting. Chapter 3,

extensively biblical, is summarized in the chart on page 59, giving the New Testament principles for church planting. Interestingly enough, focused prayer, or any kind of prayer, did not make that list of 12 principles.

Part II, Strategic Considerations, encompasses chapters 4 – 7. In chapter 4, “Church Multiplication and Indigenous Church-Planting Movements” much is gleaned from an overview of John Nevios, Roland Allen and Donald A. McGavran woven together with more recent writers such as David Garrison (See his principles on page 72). This chapter gives a good review of some excellent and groundbreaking works.

Chapter 5, “Apostolic Church Planters,” speaks of the different types of church planters and how various types and gifts are needed for a range of situations summarized in the chart on page 91. This chapter seems to assume the church planter will be a missionary, probably accurate in that most people reading this book will be North American going to a different culture. However, most church planters are probably not North American. Chapter 6 deals primarily with contextualization issues and shows how Kingdom communities might be seen in three types of church structures: House Church, Voluntary Gathered Congregations, and Cell-Celebration Church. These are appropriately exegeted and described. Considerable effort was made to demonstrate the importance of contextualizing the structure as well as the practice of the local congregation. I applaud their efforts here. Chapter 4 continues to speak of the church planter but leads us into planting churches in pioneer situations. Six different ways pioneer church planting may be carried out (page 128) are described with several real-life examples.

Part III, Developmental Phases, is the longest of the four sections. Considerable detail is given in these chapters dealing with the various phases of planting, growing and reproducing churches. Again the authors review what others (Hesselgrave, Logan, and Steffen) have written before giving a summary model that is beautiful in its simplicity. Chapters 9 – 14 go step by step through the process of planting a church.

The process is careful and methodical, showing helpful sidebars and charts, peppered with illustrations. In an overview approach, as this text purports to be, it is difficult to know what should and should not be included. Once included then how much should one say about a topic. Too little, vague. Too much, boring. Tough choices. However, I felt where the section dealt with vision it was weak (chapter 9). An understanding of what God calls one to do in terms of starting a new church is important. Some examples of vision statements and how they change over time might have been helpful. However, I am ecstatic that the topic was mentioned. Another issue raised in chapter 9 dealt with responsiveness. The encouragement seems to be to gage responsiveness to plant churches where people are more rather than less responsive. Is that a throwback to traditional church planting dogma? Is there not a place to be God’s witness in the less responsive parts?

Much of Part III needs to be read realizing not everything applies in every case. The book is an overview, an excellent one at that, and so seeks to cover as many cases as possible. That needs to be kept in mind especially in Part III. One example is the survey. The authors seem to indicate a preference for a more formal survey. Pioneer situations often necessitate an informal survey about which little was said. This fact is actually clarified later in the book when the authors revisit contextualization issues and speak of Spradley’s participant observation. Sidebar 10.1, page 206, gives a good summary of questions helpful in understanding a ministry focus people.

The emphasis in chapter 11, launching, is foundational to starting any sort of Christian community. One factor sometimes missed in our task orientation is “time.” It requires spending serious time with people to bring them to Christ and disciple them. It also requires time with a few. That comes home clearly in the book. One dimension I found somewhat diminished, though not totally absent, in this all-important chapter was a focus on prayer – saturation prayer has been a part of most church planting movements. Another analytical chart (p. 215) lists types of evangelistic approach. Shortcomings in the “Four Spiritual Law” approach to evangelism in some cultures showed how American models may come up lacking. Teaching obedience in all things is a key element in discipleship. This chapter is full of wise advice and excellent analysis.

Chapters 12 through 14 begin to look more to the epistles for their foundations. The Apostle Paul’s writings are germane here. As churches are maturing there must be a balance between the teaching ministry and developing leaders. Helping disciples to gain clarity on the function and purpose of the church is important. Corporate worship, contextualization (and some issues unique to a Muslim audience) are touched upon. A brief summary of various types of cell group ministries is given. Training and entrusting leaders with their tasks are key issues as well. There is a focus on multiplication of leaders and “kingdom communities.” The key to this multiplication starts with a mentality of multiplication. In pioneer situations or in places where churches are a few in number it is not about planting a single church but many reproducing communities of believers that will be key to reaching a population with the Gospel message. This section also develops principles for evaluating church health. One important dimension is the focus on multiplying disciples and leaders rather than programs (p. 290).

The last section, Part IV, entitled “Critical Factors,” deals with issues relating to the church planters themselves. All the issues are important and should be pondered, “The Personal Life of Church Planters chapter 15, Church Planting Teams, chapter 16, Partnerships and Resources in Church Planting, chapter 18, and Planting Churches with Kingdom Impact, chapter 19. To take one factor, “Church Planting Teams.” I think the authors wise to state that a team comes together for a purpose beyond itself, namely to foster a church planting movement. However, all that is involved in “team” is huge with trials and blessings beyond measure. This issue needs to be studied and evaluated. This chapter is an excellent step in that direction.

Concluding Thoughts

Who will read this book? Of course, teachers in Bible Schools and seminaries seeking a text for a church-planting course will do well to closely examine this book. This book coupled with a teacher’s experience could make for a rich course experience. The encyclopedic breadth of material compels a reading. Also, those desiring to familiarize themselves with important areas of church planting will find a wealth of material.

There are a couple of weaker areas in the book. These areas may well have been mentioned but in a more obscure way. The concept of multiplying house churches in totally unreached areas is not as developed as it should be for the task before us. I also feel that the book’s approach focuses too much on a “one person plants one church at a time” methodology. While there is room for that approach I find that to be inadequate to meet the growing needs. The book is quite academic and many church planters are not (by not academic I do not mean ignorant or unformed but rather learn better in non-academic settings). The approach is also more linear and church planting is often circular or even random. The order given may be ideal but the real-life situations seldom seem to follow the ideal. The authors note that the process is messy. True! I

have already mentioned that the focus on prayer in church-planting is weak. None of these points detract from the book's value.

I am glad I read the book and heartily recommend it. I rejoice that this book exists today both in print and in e-book form.