

CHURCH PLANTING: BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND MISSIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The biblical justification for church planting is generally based in Matthew 28: 18-20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.” Other related passages associated with the Great Commission include Luke 24:45-47; John 20:21-23 and Acts 1:8. In all these passages, the emphasis is placed on making disciple of all nations. J. D. Payne notes:

The apostolic Church was given the mandate to bear witness to Christ and his resurrection by making disciples of all nations. Though a disciple is made whenever a person places faith in Christ for salvation, discipling is a lifelong process. The best context for both making disciples and discipling—which includes baptism and teaching obedience is the local community of disciples (i.e., the church).¹

This argument even goes back further to Donald A. McGavran, who is considered the father of modern Church Growth Movement. In the book which he coauthored with Arthur F. Glasser, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, McGavran defines “mission” as

carrying the gospel across cultural boundaries to those who owe no allegiance to Jesus Christ, encouraging them to accept Him as Lord and Savior and to become responsible members of His Church, working, as the Holy Spirit leads, at both evangelism and justice, at making God’s will done on earth as it is done in heaven.²

¹ J.D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 11.

² Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 26.

The primary concern of this position is church planting and it is through planting new churches that disciples are made and nurtured. Therefore, planting churches automatically fulfills the mission of God.

II. THREE BIBLICAL RATIONALE FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Charles L. Chaney, in *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, proposes three biblical rationales for church planting. The first, according to him, is the nature and purpose of the church. The Greek word, *ekklesia*, referred to a local assembly convened for some specific purpose. Furthermore, the use of *ekklesia* in the New Testament was informed by the Septuagint, where *ekklesia* was used to refer to the congregation of Israel as the people of God. The *ekklesia*, Cheney argued, is also the body of Christ, where Christ is present physically and through the body, the church manifest himself to the world.³ He therefore identified the purpose of the church as evangelism, edification and to be God's treasured people in the world. In this order, three fold ministry of the church can be categorized as (1) ministry of evangelism to the world, (2), ministry of edification to the body of Christ; and (3), ministry to God in exaltation, praise and adoration. Cheney concludes by stating that through church multiplication, the church would fulfill her ministry to lost humanity while the other two ministries which are derivations would be fulfilled as churches are planted within the cultural context of every people group.⁴

III. JOHN 20:21, AN OFTEN NEGLECTED TEXT

The often neglected passage in regard to the Great Commission and making disciples is John 20:21 which states, "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I

³ Charles L. Chaney, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publication Inc., 1986), 20-21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

am sending you.” While the Great Commission passage in Matthew is extremely popular to missiologists, church planting practitioners, and even biblical interpreters, it is not given serious consideration as a key biblical rationale for church planting and the overall mission of the church. For instance, a new book, *Extending God’s Kingdom: Church Planting Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, which is an EMQ (Evangelical Missions Quarterly) monograph, has no meaningful discussion on biblical basis, only a few references to Matthew 28. Charles Chaney, while offering some good insights in his book, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, never mentioned the passage. Graig Ott and Gene Wilson in their new book, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication*, paid no attention to the passage, Ed Stetzer in *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church that’s Biblically Sound and Reaching people in Culture*, only made a passing reference by noting, “we are sent in the same manner as Jesus—by the Father—to seek and save the lost. As Christ followers, this direction can’t be clearer.”⁵ The lack of sound theological bases for church planting books in general, and negligence of the Johannine great commission passage can also be seen in early church planting books like, *Indigenous Church Planting* by Charles Brock, new church planting books like Aubrey Malphurs book, *The nuts and Bolts of Church Plantings*, *Beyond Church Planting* by Robert E. Logan and, *Organic Church* by Neil Cole. The same can be said of J. D. Payne’s book, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the What’s, Why’s, and How’s of Global Church Planting*, and *The Facilitator Era* by Tom Steffen, and the list can go on and on.

Nevertheless, the Johannine passage reveals a key to understanding the mission of God in Christ, its implication to the church and its task in making disciples. The passage stated,

⁵ Ed Stetzer. *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church that’s Biblically Sound and Reaching people in Culture* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 38.

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (NIV). This is interesting because Jesus never said, “Go Ye into the World and Plant Churches,” rather when he talked about church, he said, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” In other words, the task of building (planting) a church is Christ’s job not the disciples’. However, the church is tasked to go and represent Christ in the world just as Jesus represented the Father in the world.

Furthermore, the early church never went out to expressly plant a church but proclaimed Jesus Christ. Consequently, through their proclamation of Christ lives were transformed and the new converts become the *ekklesia*. To understand the passage in John and therefore the ministry and church planting in the New Testament, one must look at the life of Jesus Christ. How did the Father send him? What was his understanding of that sending? And how did he practice the mission before commanding the disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Jesus in the Gospel of John was presented as “the Word,” “Lamb of God,” the “I am,” “Good Sheppard,” and above all, the “Son of God.” In chapter one, Jesus was introduced as the incarnate-Son who had appeared to reveal the Father (1: 14-18). The fourth evangelist was unambiguous in declaring the understanding of his mission. The author said, “...all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (vs. 12-13). Jesus came to lead the lost humanity back to God through repentance and faith in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Earlier the disciples were invited to “come and see,” stayed with him and were transformed. In chapter 2, John mentioned that the miracle of turning water into wine was revealing “his glory,” and causing the disciples to believe in him. The temple was cleared from business transaction as he reminded the traders the house of his father was not to be a

business center. In chapter 3, Nicodemus was challenged to acknowledge the son and believe in him (John 3:3-16). Later in the passage John noted, “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (John 3: 35-36). The Samaritan woman in her encounter with Jesus in John chapter 4, was told, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” In chapter 5, Jesus said to his Jewish religious detractors that ““My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”

According to chapter 6, Jesus shocked the religious establishment by claiming, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day” (vs. 45). “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life (vs. 46-48). At the Jewish festival of Tabernacles (Chapter 7), Jesus declared the origin of his teaching. It comes from the father, and that they have a choice, to accept or to reject it. In chapters 8 -12, we see the confrontation of Jesus with the established religious groups on the question of his identity as the son of God. Jesus in the gospel of John was argumentative, combatant, confrontational, and unyielding as the son representing the father, and the only way through whom broken relationship with God will be restored.

Anyone reading the Gospel of John will not have to read much to recognize the fact that Jesus presented himself as the “Son Of God” in whom the lost world is to be reconciled back to God. D.A. Carson observed, “John’s presentation of who Jesus is lies at the heart of all that is distinctive in the Gospel. It is not just a question of some titles being ascribed to Jesus that are

found outside the Johannine corpus.... Rather, fundamental to all else that is said of him, Jesus is peculiarly the Son of God, or simply the Son.”⁶

As a result, Jesus served and ministered as the Son who had a mandate from the Father, who understood the mind of the Father, who knows the way to the Father, and who is One with the Father. Again, Carson notes:

Although ‘Son of God’ can serve as a rough synonym for ‘Messiah,’ it is enriched by the unique manner in which Jesus as God’s Son relates to his Father. He is functionally subordinate to him, and does only those things that the Father gives him to say and do, but he does everything that the Father does, since the Father shows him everything that he himself does.⁷

Carson concludes, “The perfection of Jesus’ obedience and the unqualified nature of his dependence thereby became the loci in which Jesus discloses nothing less than the words and deeds of God.”⁸

From this perspective, reading other gospels make sense at the awesomeness of Jesus’ ministry. Eckhard J. Schnabel notes, Jesus “understood himself as ‘sent’ by God (Lk 4:43) to gather ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt 15:24). Jesus traveled through Galilee, visiting villages and towns, proclaiming the good news of the dawn of God’s kingdom, calling Israel to repent and to believe in the present fulfillment of God’s covenant promises.”⁹ Furthermore, Eckhard insists, Jesus perceived himself as anointed by God’s Spirit (Lk 4:18), “who set off the liberating power of the turning point of God’s history with his people and with the world through his teaching activity, through healing the sick and through liberating people from demons, thus making visible the eschatological power of God (Mt 12:28-29).”¹⁰ The good news therefore

⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 95.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Early Christian Mission*. Vol. 1. (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity, 2004), 207.

¹⁰ Ibid.

became the good news in this sense because it frees, liberates, and restores the broken relationship with the Father. However, Jesus not only proclaimed and demonstrated the good news, he gathered disciples to train them as “fishers of people,” coworkers in his own missionary activity.¹¹

To the disciples, the understanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus as the “sent one” from the Father, underscored their own ministry. As Schnabel rightly points out, the importance of the disciples’ mission to the lost world in John’s Gospel can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Jesus’ own sending happened in total dependence upon the Father. He was absolutely faithful to the will of the Father who had sent him; he was utterly dedicated to do the work that He had been given. If this is true for Jesus as an envoy of the Father, it is even more true for the mission of the apostles as “servants” (*douloi*) of God (Jn 13:16).
- (2) The work of the disciples is not a new work that they have initiated but rather the “continuation of the work of others,” namely, the prophets and Jesus (Jn 4:38).
- (3) The sending of the disciples into the world is based on the relationship between the Son and the Father, between Jesus and God (Jn 13:20). The mission of the disciples is the consequence and the result of the mission of Jesus.
- (4) The fruit that Jesus refers to (Jn 15:16) is the mutual love of his followers, which corresponds to the love of Jesus (Jn 15:4, 7-8), and it is at the same time, in the context of “going,” a reference to the missionary success, to the conversion of people to faith in Jesus Christ. Such fruit exists only as a gift from God, for which the disciples can only pray.
- (5) The sending of the disciples that happens according to the example of the sending of the Son by the Father (Jn 17:18) is based upon mutual love and unity, characteristics of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The internal relationships of the disciples

¹¹ Ibid.

among themselves are not more important, however, than their external relationship with the world. Their mission is not simply a “mission by attraction”: the disciples are to “go” and bring fruit (Jn 15:16), to “bear witness” with the help of the Spirit (Jn 15:26-27), to proclaim a message that helps people come to faith in Jesus (Jn 17:20), to offer forgiveness to people (Jn 20:23).

(6) The sending of the disciples by Jesus corresponds to the sending of Jesus by the Father: this entails that they should know Jesus as intimately as Jesus knows the Father (Jn 15:15; 17:7, 8, 25), be utterly dependent upon Jesus in the same way as the Son is dependent upon the Father (Jn 4:13-14; 15:7-8, 16), bring glory to Jesus and do his will as Jesus did the will of the Father (Jn 4:3, 5:30, 38), be obedient to Jesus and keep his word (Jn 14:21, 23-24; 15:14, 20; 17:6), make Jesus known and testify of him as Jesus made known the Father and bore witness of him (Jn 12:44, 45; 13:20).¹²

In view of this radical relationship of the Father and Son, and the understanding of their mandate as being sent just as the Father sent his Son, the early disciples were persuaded that salvation of both Jews and non-Jews regardless of their religious background depended on their acceptance of God’s manifestation in Jesus Christ through faith and obedience.

Often, there has been undue emphasis on St. Paul and his ministry because of Acts and the number of his letters in the New Testament. But the apostles before him had learned from the example of Jesus to preach the gospel that they were commissioned for, in cities, towns and villages. Again, Schnabel remarked, “The early Christian mission among Gentiles-God-fearers, sympathizers with the Jewish faith and polytheists- was not an invention of Paul of Tarsus. The project of the Gentile mission that planned and worked for the conversion of pagans to faith in the one true God and in Jesus the Lord and Savior has its roots in the teaching and ministry of

¹² Ibid., 279-280.

Jesus himself.”¹³ Understood against this presupposition of God’s promises through the Old Testament prophets, Jesus taught and preached the fulfillment of time and the arrival of the kingdom of God. A message that provoked and forced “his disciples to proclaim as well (Mt 10:7/Lk 10:9) - caused, with salvation-historical and theological necessity, the move to the nations, whose pilgrimage to Mount Zion and whose conversion to the one true God was expected by Israel.”¹⁴

Lastly, the challenge of the new Christian community was not necessarily admitting the Gentile converts, but how they are to be admitted. In other words, which culture the new congregations will be clothed with. Even in the book of Acts, before Paul, there was Stephen, whose understanding of the gospel and its implication was too radical for his contemporaries, hence he was stoned to death. Philip’s ministry to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian aristocrat was not an isolated incident. Peter, although hesitant in going to the Gentiles was obedient to the heavenly vision. In the book of Acts, the persecuted followers went everywhere preaching and sharing Christ.

Therefore, the “church” as it relates to Jesus and the early disciples was not an institution; but a movement. It was not an organization; but an organism. It was not a group of unknown individuals pursuing their own agendas, but a family of God, men and women born not of the desire of humans; but by the Spirit of God. People transformed through their relationship with Christ and who are willing to have the same radical obedience the Son had with his Father. The disciples were not commissioned to plant churches as we know them today, but to proclaim Christ who builds his church through the transformation of lives and character by the Holy Spirit. The church as it were, never had monstrous organizations as we have today, or institutions and

¹³ Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Early Christian Mission*. Vol. 2. (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity, 2004), 1542.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

complex bureaucracies as they exist today. He created a culture of multiplication, and trained gospel catalysts. The New Testament church was never a denomination as we are fractured today. It was a family, a household of God, men and women from diverse backgrounds, slaves and masters, educated and illiterates, rich and poor, nobles and commons. It was a movement that frightened the established religious leaders, confronted the stereotypes, and changed the world.

The disciples shared Christ, prayed for the healing of the sick, shared their food and goods, and bridged the socio-cultural barriers. The new converts functioned like a household; there was no reticence to hinder their growth. Wherever two or three could gather, they would have church and worship. Even in prison, Paul and Silas could worship and praise God. What a big contrast to what we have today.

IV. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE WORD ‘EKKLESIA’

Charles Van Engen suggests that one way to define the church is to study the word ‘ekklesia,’ a word used “at least seventy–three times in the New Testament to refer to the church.¹⁵ The word *ekklesia*, Van Engen points out, was derived from “*ek* and *kaleo* and (speaks of) the assembly of free citizens in the Greek city states who through a herald were ‘called out’ of their homes to the market place. In ordinary usage the word denoted the people as assembled, the public meeting.”¹⁶ Therefore, he argues, the term *ekklesia* “indicated the self-consciousness of the early Christians, who saw themselves as the continuation of what God had begun in the

¹⁵ Charles Van Engen, “Church,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions*, 192.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

wilderness with the nation of Israel, called together by the proclamation of the Gospel for the purpose of belonging to God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

Steve Atkerson and Tim Wilson think that *ekklesia* “was used almost without exception to refer to the political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions.”¹⁸ They identified **six** usages of *ekklesia* (church) in the New Testament. The **first** was in Acts 19:23-41 (especially, in vv. 25, 32, 39, and 41). In these passages, *ekklesia* means an assembly, a legal assembly, and here, assembly refers to the meeting of the craftsmen (19:24), who were ‘called’ (19:25) together by Demetrius into the theater (19:31) to decide what to do with Paul.¹⁹ The **second** usage of *ekklesia*, in Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12, refers to the gathering of the Israelites in the desert at Mount Sinai, where they received God’s legislation through Moses and decided to abide by it.²⁰ The **third** usage was in Matthew 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-18, and 14:4-5. In these verses, *ekklesia* referred to the regularly scheduled, duly convened assembly of Christians, in which they held open discussions, rendered decisions about sin, and ate the Lord’s Supper.²¹ The **fourth** usage was in Acts 8:1 and Romans 16:1, in which *ekklesia* referred to the totality of all Christians living in a particular place.

The New Testament authors, according to Atkerson and Wilson, wrote of one church (singular) in Jerusalem, one in Rome, etc. However, the churches in a given city may have never assembled in one place, although the church in Jerusalem and in Corinth may have been exceptions.²² The **fifth** usage was in Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and the second verse of Philemon; *ekklesia* took the form of regular assemblies convened in a member’s

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Steve Atkerson and Tim Wilson, “I Will Build My Church,” in *Toward a House Church Theology*, ed., Steve Atkerson (Atlanta: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1998), 63.

¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

²² Ibid.

house. **Finally**, in Matthew 16:18, Acts 9:31, and Ephesians 1:22, 3:10, 20-21, and 5:23, ekklesia assumed the significance of the totality of the body of Christ, the universal church.²³

In light of this understanding, Atkerson and Wilson contend that, in the New Testament, the church is not the coming together of God’s people, but what happens when they come together. Today, the word “church” is understood in different ways—such as denomination, baptized members of a local assembly, or even a building—depending on one’s ecclesiastical tradition. Nevertheless, for Atkerson and Wilson, Christians are “expected by the Lord to enforce the law of Christ (within the family of God) and deal with issues as they arise. This is a part of what is to occur in the open, participatory church meetings.”²⁴

Therefore, the word “church”—in the broadest sense—will connote the idea of “called out ones, those who have been called out of the world into a relationship with the Father, through the atoning death of his Son, by the working of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ Nate Krupp notes that, whenever the Scriptures mention the church, “It never means a building, it never refers to a denomination, and it is never used in referring to an organization, only people.”²⁶ We are the church, he affirmed. “We don’t go to the church, we don’t join the church, we don’t have a church, we are the church.”²⁷ The church is the people Jesus died to save—people who would be in a loving relationship with Him and in loving right relationship with one another.²⁸ And unless we return back to the root of what it means to have a church, the idea of reaching our world for Christ will continue to be elusive. The modern church has strayed away from what Jesus founded and the disciples practiced.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 67.

²⁵ Nate Krupp, *God’s Simple Plan for His Church and Your Place in It: A Manual for House Churches* (Woodburn, OR: Solid Rock, 1993), 19.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁸ Ibid.

V. CONCLUSION

The early church was transformational and relational; but flexible in structure, organization, celebratory, and sacramental. The early church never bought or built a building or owned property. They met in public squares from existing places in their communities like temple, synagogues, city hall, beaches, private homes, and public places. On the contrary, modern church is more structural and sacramental, less transformational, and of course, almost dead in relationships. We own massive structures today, land, worship and administrative buildings, business, home schools, private schools, café shops, gymnasiums, radio stations, television stations, listen to our own talk shows, etc. The result is that we have become a culture to ourselves and have created a subculture that isolated us from the world. Instead of engaging the world as Jesus did, we run away, we are more attuned to cultural wars than spiritual warfare, more satisfied with comfort than serving sacrificially, more inclined to building our denominational empire than serving the kingdom purpose; defending our denominational life and doctrines than the cause of Christ. Churches are administered more like CEO business model than the humble servant Jesus demonstrated. Anyone living in Jesus' time could meet with him, talk with him, interrupt his activities, and even invite him home for dinner. Our church leaders are too remote, difficult to reach, afraid of contacts and strangers, live in gated communities, and have bodyguards. How can we reconcile the movement, the organism, the redeemed, and the family of God called the church that Jesus started and the church as we have it today?