



Why We *Don't* Plant Churches in North America

- Welcome to our study on church planting. During our time together we're going to be looking at the topic of planting biblical New Testament congregations. We'll look at theological bases, biblical formulas, and practical applications for the strategy of planting new churches.

Introduction:

Let me start by saying that church planting is important, but not so we can have more buildings and more meetings. Church planting is important because it reaches lost people for Christ and they in turn experience real change through the power of the Gospel. As we go through this study, I hope you'll follow along in your notebook. There are many blanks to fill in and a variety of assignments we will do together.

So make it your priority to learn this material because even if you don't become a church planter, your church may become a mothering church, a sponsoring church, or a partnering church to a new church plant. In addition, this course will help you to better understand the Scriptures. As you study the New Testament, you'll begin to discover the context in which churches were planted, along with the problems and challenges of dealing with these new churches.

You may be asking, "If church planting is so important, Why Don't We Plant Churches in North America?" And that's the title of this first section. Now we can say that we plant some churches, and certainly that's true, but there is not a lot of activity in North America as a whole. Now there have been seasons where church planting was very popular:

In the early founding of North America, the Congregationalists planted many churches.

Following them were the Anglicans . . .

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Later the Presbyterians planted churches on what was then the new frontier.

From 1795 to 1810, Baptists and Methodists on the frontier planted thousands of churches. William Warren Sweet referred to them as “Baptist Farmer-Preachers.” This Farmer-Preacher would farm all week and then on Saturday they had an all day church conference. On Sunday they had worship. They were simply good “salt of the earth folks” who had church under trees, in hotels, and houses located in large cities and small towns. Methodist congregations were having church under trees with services being led by circuit-riding preachers.

So while we have historically seen these seasons of church planting, today it is relatively scarce by comparison. And while it's true that in the last twenty years of the twentieth century we saw over 50,000 churches planted, the fact is that more churches closed than were planted. We will want to talk about why that is the case because today it is much more controversial to plant churches than it was in years past. People say, “There's already a church in that community.”

In years past, when a new Methodist church came to a central Ohio town that had no other church, there wasn't much controversy. But today if you go to a major city like Seattle to plant a church in the inner city, it may be considered controversial by many existing churches in the area. But that makes no sense.

So it's important for us to recognize the mood of the church towards church planting. That's important because how the church at large feels about this subject impacts your view and my view of church planting. If you ask the typical pastor, “Why don't you plant a church,” he'll have a series of reasons. Some of those reasons may be valid, but what we want to look at are some common objections to church planting. We must address those objections in the light of the biblical texts, but also in the reality of our missional situation in North America today. So let's look at some of the reasons why we don't plant a multitude of churches in North America today. First of all . . .

A creeping anti-missional mentality.

- Circle “anti-missional.” Missional means **missionary**. A missional church is a church on mission in its societal setting and geographic context. That's a good thing, but sometimes churches and denominations can develop **anti-mission** mentalities.

As long as they're going overseas to a place where there aren't any similar churches, missions are considered "acceptable." And as a result, this creeping anti-missional attitude keeps us from evangelizing vast stretches of North America.

Look at some of the reasons for this attitude...

⊕ Large Church Mentality:

▪ **The idea that "Bigger is Better."**

- Are we against large churches? Of course not! We need both the mega-churches and the mini-churches. Both have a place in reaching lost people. But...

▪ Larger does not necessarily mean better.

- All large churches don't have a passion for winning the lost, reaching out with the message of Christ. And that church is not reaching the New Testament objective of reaching out to its geographic area and winning that community to Christ.

"Among evangelical churches,
those under three years old will win ten people to
Christ per year for every hundred church members;
those 3 to 15 years old will win five people per year.
After age 15, the number drops to three per year."¹

- So the fact is the longer a church is in existence, the fewer people it will win to Christ, in proportion to its attendance. That fact alone ought to challenge established churches to be focused on reaching the lost and not to lose that focus. But it also ought to challenge us to recognize that new churches are more effective at reaching the lost than older established churches. This Large-Church Mentality makes us think we can only be successful if there are large churches. Large churches are good and they are needed, but new churches tend to be more effective at winning the lost. And hopefully, in turn they will become large churches, retaining that focus on reaching the lost.

A second area hindering church planting in North America today is the...

⊕ **Professional Church Syndrome:**

▪ **Need professional seminary–trained pastor.**

- But the truth is that whenever a church planting movement has occurred, it happened when God-called people have stepped up to be anointed by God for the task. Yes, they receive training on the field and they may receive it in a seminary or a Bible college. But ultimately when we say, "You must have a seminary degree to pastor a church," we limit God. In addition, we're condemning New Testament church plants since the seminary had not yet been set up in Jerusalem. So in reality, when God-called people answer the call and receive training as they plant churches and reach the lost, God can use people and a church planting movement can break out.

Roland Allen in his book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* believed educational attainment is inversely proportional to evangelistic ability. In other words, the more education you have, the less evangelism you tend to do.² That ought to concern us. Seminary is a place where we train in theology and methodology, but if we come out on the other side of our education unable to relate to lost people and win them to Christ, then we have missed the purpose of our theological education.

So the Professional Church Syndrome is a challenge. Now look at . . .

⊕ **Parish Church Mindset:**

▪ **Need just one church per town.**

- Peter Wagner said, "Some are reluctant to start new churches for fear of harming those churches that are currently located in the target community. They feel that doing so could create undesirable competition between brothers and sisters in Christ. I mention here that in more cases than not, a new church in the community tends to raise the religious interest of the people in general and if handled properly can be a benefit to existing churches. That which blesses the kingdom of God as a whole also blesses the churches that truly are a part of the Kingdom."³ He went on to cite that in the town of Ewa, Hawaii, a Southern Baptist church was planted. This church plant raised the spiritual level so high that the Roman Catholic Church witnessed a 100% attendance growth and the local Congregational church saw an attendance increase of 155%."⁴

Lyle Schaller has made a similar observation about planting a new congregation in the midst

of existing congregations of the same denomination. He said, "Contrary to conventional wisdom, congregations usually benefit from interdenominational competition. While it is impossible to isolate one factor as being decisive, the presence of two or more congregations with the same denominational affiliation usually results in a higher level of congregational health and vitality than if one congregation has a denominational monopoly in that community."⁵

And ultimately, isn't that what we'd expect. That when a new church comes into the community to lift up the Kingdom of God, other churches catch the spirit and get to work sharing Christ. Because there are plenty of lost people to go around.

In addition . . .

The church to population ratio is also declining for every 10,000 Americans.

- ⊕ In 1900 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- ⊕ In 1950 there were 17 churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- ⊕ In 1996 there were 11 churches for every 10,000 Americans.⁶

- So you would think, "But hasn't the size of churches increased?" Actually the answer is "no." The median church size has stayed pretty close to what it was 100 years ago, yet at the same time the number of churches has declined. There are much larger churches than there were 100 years ago but again, the median size has stayed about the same. So we need more churches. But the Parish Church Mentality, thinking one church per town is sufficient, has hindered the planting of new churches.

Consider for a moment a lesson from business. What if there was a city of 100,000 people and they had no McDonald's. Would they open just one franchise to meet the needs of the entire population? Of course not! A town of 100,000 with no McDonald's is a gold mine to the company! They don't just build one restaurant; they build 10 restaurants to service all those people. And in the same way, when you consider the demographics, the best way to reach people for Christ is through a multitude of churches. Thousands of souls hang in the balance. The truth is, many churches of all types are needed to reach the multitudes for Christ. Another thing that hinders church planting is . . .

⊕ **Rescue Approach:**

- The cry to “Help the dying churches!”
 - Harder to restart a dead church than start a new one.
 - Buildings should never be a justification for strategy.
 - One result is that the vast majority of new congregations in the United States and Canada reach their peak in size during the first two or three decades of their existence and then remain on a plateau in size or begin to shrink in numbers.
- What also will be found, is that Church Planting is the most cost-effective means of winning the lost!
 - It's the idea that our central focus ought to be that of rescuing churches that are in decline. Now don't misunderstand, helping dying churches is important, but what we need to do is to adopt a strategy that includes both church planting and church strengthening. Watch this video where a church planter talks about “Why Plant Churches.”

Video: Why Plant Churches...

Let me share with you a few things that church growth experts have to say about planting and revitalizing churches.

- It is harder to restart a dead church than start a new one. It is immensely easier to start a new church than it is to revitalize one that has started into a pattern of decline.
- Buildings should never be a justification for strategy. Buildings aren't enough. People need to be the justification for our strategy. If people are in love with church buildings sometimes they lose their love for unchurched people.
- Lyle Schaller, in his book 44 Questions for Church Planters, writes, "...new churches are more likely to reach more people and to grow in size than are long-established parishes."⁷ Perhaps the simplest explanation of this pattern is that new congregations are organized around evangelism and reaching people not actively involved in the life of any worshipping community. By contrast, powerful internal institutional pressures tend to encourage long-established churches to allocate most of their resources to the care of members.

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- One result is that the vast majority of new congregations in the United States and Canada reach their peak in size during the first two or three decades of their existence and then remain on a plateau in size or begin to shrink in numbers.
- New churches win many more folks to Christ per attendee than the existing church... thus, in a sense they are an irreplaceable arm of the "gift of evangelism" for the Body of Christ.
- What also will be found, is that Church Planting is the most cost-effective means of winning the lost!

Each dollar invested in church planting wins far more than those in existing church expenditures. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be helping established churches, but there must be more of a focus on church planting. There needs to be balance. The cry in Christian circles isn't: "Let's ignore established churches." But there is a tendency to ignore church planting. So we need to focus more attention on the process.

Furthermore, healthy church plants become self-supporting after a few years, thus making those dollars reproduce... not just for the short-term, but until Christ returns.

Another reason people site for not planting churches is the . . .

⊕ Already Reached Myth:

■ **Idea that America and Canada are already evangelized.**

- People are fond of saying that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that Canada was founded upon the principles of peace, order, good government, and Christian principles. And so there's this perception that North America is made up of two Christian nations. But in reality, today neither nation is what we could call Christian. Look at these examples. Alan Walker writes:

Our culture is dominated no longer by a Biblical Christian worldview, but of "an echo, of an echo, of an echo" of Truth. ~Alan Walker

Examples: judge not, many mansions, etc.

- For example, the most well known Bible verse in our culture isn't John 3:16. It is Matthew 7:1 where Jesus said: "Judge not." All the culture knows of Jesus' emphasis is that we must not judge. In fact, most unchurched people think that the basis of Christianity is a lack of "judgementalness." But we know that 1 Corinthians 5 tells us that it's appropriate to judge those who are in the church. It's a part of the process of church discipline. So in quoting this verse, the culture has "an echo, of an echo, of an echo" of truth.

Another example is a belief in our culture that there are many ways to heaven. People use the verse where Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." (John 14:2 NKJV) And they'll use this verse to explain that there are many paths of salvation. The culture mis-quotes Bible verses because they simply don't understand what they mean.

The way our culture distorts the truth can be seen in virtually any talk show these days. The guests on the show might be a homosexual couple trying to adopt a child, and the host presents their case and asks them questions. They're portrayed as a loving, stable couple just wanting to raise kids no one else wants. And then the host will take the microphone into the audience to ask for questions and comments. Someone stands up and says "Yes, this all sounds well and good, but the Bible says that God's standard is one man and one woman in a marriage raising children." They might do a great job expressing biblical truth, but then the host will smile at them and say, "Well that may be true for you, but who are we to judge! As long as they're happy and aren't hurting anybody...and isn't it right that Jesus said 'judge not?'"

What we have is a secular religion. In North America today, the one sin of the secular religion is the sin of intolerance. In the eyes of this culture there is no other sin. The difficulty for us is that in looking at the Scriptures, we see all kinds of sin. Intolerance is often found in Scripture when a lifestyle is contrary to the Word of God. So the very stance we take against sin is often seen as sinful by the broader culture.

It is clear to see that America and Canada are not reached. They are what we call "post-Christian nations." Perhaps once they were Christian but such is not the case today.

The average American is a "smorgasborder," arbitrarily picking from a religious plethora of half-truths, and out-right lies.

- **The Estimated North American Lost Population is now in excess of 200 million.**

- **Between 92-98% of Canadians are unchurched.⁸**
 - Video: Georges Boujakly about the need in Canada.
- **North America is the only continent where Christianity is NOT growing.**
 - Every other continent in the world is seeing Christianity grow except North America. We have more Bible colleges, more seminaries, more radio and television programs, and more Bible knowledge than anywhere else in the world but the church in North America is in decline.

By some estimates, half of all churches in the USA did not add one new member through "conversion growth."

The evangelical Church in Canada continues to lose ground.

The Charter of Rights and Multiculturalism has brought a more formalized process to the demise of Canada as a Christian Nation. The courts are filled with cases that are trying to remove all references to the Christian faith. Lawmakers are seeking to purge all references to a Christian faith.

So in looking at these facts we've got to admit that America and Canada aren't being reached. The parish mentality of one church for one town isn't doing it. Rescuing declining churches is important and good, but it's not enough. And so each objection to church planting must face the reality of our situation. We need to understand that North America is in need of new churches. So . . .

Why Start Churches?

⊕ The pragmatic is important.

- ***Simply because "Church Planting is the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven!" ~C. Peter Wagner⁹***
- ***Because "The United States of America is now the third largest mission field in the world!" ~Thomas T. Clegg⁹***
 - So these are pragmatic reasons for starting new churches. And these are important. But . . .

⊕ **The biblical is *more* important.**

- We don't plant churches just because we see a need. We do it because . . .

Church Planting is normative in the New Testament.

- "*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it!*" (NIV)

~Matthew 16:18

- The New Testament, from the Book of Acts to the book of Revelation, is the historical record and supervision of first century church planting! It is the natural extension of Jesus' proclamation that "I will build my church...". So the biblical is more important. And as we look to the New Testament we see that...

⊕ **Jesus is a Seeker who loves the Lost.**

- *The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.* ~Luke 19:10

- *"For the joy set before Him endured the cross—"*

The greatest revelation of the passion of God for lost people is Calvary.

~Hebrews 12:2

- As He hung from the cross, His greatest passion was not for us to build a bigger building with fancy carpet! Jesus' greatest hope for the church was that we be consistently missional in our focus of reaching lost people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Tom Clegg and Warren Bird wrote: "Any church that doesn't shift from 'ministry as status quo' to 'ministry as mission field' will die or become hopelessly irrelevant to the people its charter document, the Bible, calls it to love, serve, reach, and even die for." ¹¹

- **Jesus' passion for the lost was so great that He didn't worry that He made church people uncomfortable.**

- Sinners felt comfortable around Jesus, but the religious crowd was angry and upset with Him. Why? Because of His great passion for getting close to lost people. And my hope is wherever you serve, the very thing they accused Jesus of is what they'll accuse you of; you spend too much time with lost people!

⊕ **The Bible says the emphasis is on the seeker and not the convinced.**

- Now some would say, "The Bible says 'No one seeks God.'" But Proverbs 8:17 says, "Those who seek me find me." Certainly, no one seeks God without the power of the Holy Spirit working in their heart, but seeking is where the focus needs to be.
- Video: John Lapos on why we plant churches...because God loves the lost.
- *I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* ~Matthew 9:13
- *They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick.*
~Mark 2:17
- *The parable of lost sheep, lost coin, and the lost son in Luke 15.*
- **It means that finding lost people is the top priority of the church.**
 - It means that the church must be concerned about the harvest. The love of Christ must go out to the lost or it is not genuine love (c.f. the parable of lost sheep).
 - It means that the church must be willing to sacrifice its own comfort for the sake of reaching the lost. It's what any family would do for one of theirs who was lost.
 - It means that the resources of the church (time, talent, and treasure) must be devoted to the priority of God for the harvest.
 - It means finding a way to care for existing Christians in such a way that fuels motivation for an ever increasing concern and effort to find and love the lost to Christ.

⊕ **Biblical responses to conversion indicate its importance.**

- *"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance,"* (Luke 15:7 NASB).
- *In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents,* (Luke 15:10 NASB).

- *Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren,"* (~Acts 15:3 NASB).
- Church planting, not just the converting of individuals, was the method of the apostle Paul. ~ Roland Allen ¹²
 - So, as we near the end of this session, I want you to be more evangelistic. I also want you to be more aware of the need for church planting. So let me leave you with this thought...

How does your church prioritize?

Make a list of all the ministries of your church to its members and then list the ministries of your church for finding and folding in the lost.

Activities/Ministries:

<i>Geared towards Believers</i>	<i>Geared towards Unchurched</i>
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.
8.	8.
9.	9.
10.	10.

- It's probably true that in most of our churches the column on the left will have most of the activities and ministries. Sunday School is geared towards believers. Nursery Ministry, Women's Ministry...geared towards believers. Men's Ministry, Worship Ministry, Building Ministry, Children's Ministry . . . all of these are generally geared towards believers. Now all of these are important ministries that God can use. But in the average church, generally there's only a handful of ministries (if any) whose primary focus is reaching the lost. So we need to ask some hard questions: "Have we lost the focus? Can we renew it again?" The revitalization of established churches is part of the answer. But in the final analysis we have to recognize that new churches are the ultimate evangelistic tool because they begin with no other purpose than reaching unbelievers. New Testament churches begin in the soil of lostness where they sow the seeds of the Gospel. And that becomes a biblical foundation for a new church.

■ Here are some questions that may be used to guide your post lecture discussion:

1. Based on the chart you filled out, how do you think your church is doing? What can you do to change it?
2. What are some of the “proposals” that you have heard to “fix” the North American church? Do you think it will work?
3. Why is it so hard for most pastors to get excited about church planting? What does this tell about us?
4. Why is it easy to lose focus on the priority of evangelism?
5. Which myth do you think is most influential? Why?

notes