

# Plant the Gospel; Plant Churches

by **Tony Merida**



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As I write this article, our core team for our new church plant has been gathering for a grand total of three weeks. We currently have about twenty people on the team, and several children. We are filled with excitement, joy, anticipation, and nervousness. I have served as an itinerant evangelist, a camp pastor, a succession pastor, and (still am) a seminary professor. But I have never planted a church. Where should I begin? The answer is, of course, the Bible.

But does the Bible actually say anything about church planting? I often hear people, even my friends, say things like, “Church planting is not in the Bible” or, “Jesus never told us to plant churches.” To which I say, “Are you sure about that?”

Standing on the shoulders of wise missiologists<sup>1</sup>, let me point out two New Testament convictions and one New Testament example that provide a basic biblical understanding of church planting. The biblical foundations for church planting are not limited to these, but these two particular items are both essential and memorable.

## Two New Testament Convictions

First, *The Great Commission points to church planting*. This doesn't mean that Jesus gave us a command to “plant churches” explicitly. Admittedly, you will look in vain to find such a command. However, Jesus told us to “make disciples of all nations” by “baptizing them” and “teaching them.” What does it mean to make disciples by *baptizing* and *teaching* them? It means incorporating them into the life of a church.

In my view, baptism is an ordinance of the church, which serves as a public profession of faith for believers. It identifies them with the body of Christ. Therefore, Christ's orders in the Great Commission seem to have the church in view.

After Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, about three thousand were converted, and then baptized. Immediately following this, we read about these believers gathering in Acts 2:42-47 for worship in this new church. These baptized believers gathered for worship to, among other things, *teach* all that Jesus commanded. I would argue, then, that the Great Commission points

to the idea of church planting – not church planting with a building, a budget, and a website – but church planting in terms of identifying new believers in baptism and equipping new believers through sound teaching.

Another way to say this is that we are called to “plant the Gospel” and then see that healthy churches are developed. This is our goal at Imago Dei Church. We want to plant the Gospel in Raleigh, North Carolina. Even though Raleigh is in the South, it is, at best, 16% evangelical, and is currently the fastest growing metro area in the nation. There are people studying in the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina metropolitan area from all over the world. It is an area that boasts of the “most Ph.D.'s per capita” than anywhere in the nation. We want to plant the Gospel in this influential city, and then make disciples through the local church.

Second, *Paul's basic ministry methodology was urban church planting*. Again, it was a “plant the Gospel first, then help the church get established,” but nevertheless, it was a church planting movement. In Acts we find Paul preaching the Gospel in major cities, then establishing

the church in which elders were appointed for the purpose of spiritual growth and health. Many of these new congregations are described for us in the New Testament letters. In fact, the New Testament is basically a collection of new church plants.

Certainly, there are also practical reasons to plant churches in today's world. Around the world, more people are moving to urban centers, filled with throngs of people and few churches. The ethnic diversity of America is growing, which also calls for new churches. In some unreached places, various people groups have little or no biblical church. These are all important notes to consider, which add weight to these two New Testament principles. Not only do we have biblical reasons for planting new congregations, but we also have a context in which we need to apply them urgently. People need the Gospel and a church in which to belong.

## A New Testament Example: The Church in Philippi

Consider the church in Philippi (Acts 16:6-40). Paul, in response to the Spirit's call, plants the first church on European soil! How did it happen? Again, the same pattern: *plant the Gospel; plant the church*. In joyful sacrifice, Paul reaches three different types of people.

He first goes to a place of prayer where a lady named Lydia is converted and baptized. She then invites Paul and the missionaries

to her home. Later, she apparently allowed her home to become the gathering place (new church) for the entire group of believers in Philippi (Acts 16:40). Next, Paul encounters a fortune telling “slave girl” who is delivered from an evil spirit. Finally, there is a jailer who is present when Paul and Silas are put into prison. Here we have three different classes of people: Lydia (wealthy), the slave girl (poor), and a jailer (middle class?). We have three different avenues for reaching them: Lydia (with teaching at a religious gathering), Slave Girl (through deeds of mercy), and a Jailer (through example). They also represent three different nationalities: Lydia (Asian); Slave-Girl (Native Greek); Jailer (Roman). Moreover, each had different spiritual backgrounds: Lydia (Religious); Slave-Girl (spiritual turmoil), and a Jailer (indifferent?). Paul faithfully ministers the good news in the city, to various types of people, and as a result the first church in Europe, probably meeting in Lydia's house, is formed (Acts 16:40).

About ten years later, Paul writes to the Philippian church from a Roman prison and his epistle to the Philippians radiates with joy. They were his partners, his brothers and sisters. The apostle



continued to labor for “their progress and joy in the faith” (Phil. 1:25).

In response to the Great Commission, and in light of the missionary methods of Paul, may we plant the Gospel all over the world; creating healthy churches for the glory of Christ and the progress and joy of all peoples.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to Tim Keller's *Church Planter Manual* for the outline of this article. Other helpful resources include Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2006).

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