



Jim Griffith and Bill Easum, *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008. pg. 122. \$19.99.

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While I recognize in the church planting world (at least in the United States) this book is quite popular, my feelings about it are not as positive as other reviewers. Don't get me wrong, I do think this book should be read by church planters, especially those who are preparing to plant and pastor newly planted churches, but I have several concerns with this work. Rarely, do I find myself reading a book where I agree strongly with the authors on a significant portion of their points and disagree strongly with the authors on the other significant portion of their points. Yet, such is the case with this book.

I am a practically-oriented individual, so I greatly appreciate the practical information provided by Griffith and Easum. Such is a major strength of this work. The authors draw from a wealth of church planting experience and years of coaching church planters and pastors. As the title notes, the purpose of this book is to alert the reader to what the authors believe are the ten most common mistakes made by church planters. Each chapter contains an explanation of the problem, a way to correct the mistake, and a brief section for church planting coaches and supervisors.

The ten problems addressed in this book are:

- Neglecting the Great commandment in Pursuit of the Great Commission
- Failing to Take Opposition Seriously
- A Love Affair with One's Fantasy Statement Blinds the Planter to the Mission Field
- Premature Launch
- Evangelism Ceases After the Launch
- No Plan for the Other Six Days of the Week
- Fear of Talking about Money Until It is Too Late
- Failure of the Church to Act Its Age and Its Size
- Formalizing Leadership Too Soon
- Using the "Superstar" Model as the Paradigm for All Church Plants



In addition to the practical nature of this work, I also agree that these ten problems are major issues on the hearts of many church planters. Such is a strength of the book.

Other great strengths include: The authors rightly warn church planters about neglecting their personal walk with God, thus loving the ministry more than Him. They discuss the importance of prayer and assimilation. They warn against failing to understand the reality of spiritual warfare. They challenge church planters to contextualize their methods, rather than attempting to force their dreams on the people. They remind church planters that churches are not planted in the office, but rather in the fields.

In light of these excellent points, I encourage you to add this book to your library. Griffith and Easum have assisted us in understanding many of the challenges facing church planters. This book is a helpful resource.

However, my concerns regarding the contents of this book are almost as numerous as the strengths of the book. I'll begin with chapter four, "Premature Launch." The title notes that the authors are referring to a particular church planting methodology, but I do not recall such a disclaimer. Rather, they write as if all church planting follows this paradigm.

The authors note that "one of the main reasons new starts fail" is due to a "premature birth" (34). They write, "Again, let us repeat—one of the recurring symptoms in failed church plants is premature birth, because the new church lacks sufficient infrastructure and development to survive on such limited resources. It lacks the amount of fuel necessary to overcome the gravitational pull of inertia" (35). My concern here is, how big and how many resources are needed to plant a church? Maybe another question would be what was needed in the first century to plant a church? The authors' comments reflect their observations based on a specific *model* of planting churches in the United States, albeit the expected *model*. However, I would question their assessment of the problem. A "premature birth" issue is a *model* problem. The real matter at stake is a theological problem.

Most church planters have a definition of the local church that is difficult to plant, for such a definition is laden with a great amount of American cultural Christianity. The authors' methodological bias is reflected in the context of discussing a premature launch when they note, "Every church plant will burn through large amounts of money before ever seeing a black bottom line" (38). Such a statement leads me to ask the question, how much money is necessary to plant a church? Again, maybe another question would be how much money was needed in the first century to plant a church?

The authors continue noting, "Whatever kind of church you're called to plant, you have to have a critical mass of people to add legitimacy and validity to it in the eyes of the public" (39) and that the public launch "is the time when you let the mission field know you are 'open for business'" (41). This statement, of course, clearly notes that the authors are not simply noting that they have been talking about one *model* among church planting paradigms, but rather *the model* to use if anyone is going to plant a church. This of course, leads me to another set of questions, again, revealing deep theological concerns. When did the local church ever need "legitimacy" and "validity" in the eyes of the public—especially among the unbelievers? If church planting is about attracting

people to a worship service or a church's event, then we need to listen closely to the authors. However, if biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches, then most American church planters have some serious theological problems if the authors' assessment of the field (including their response) is correct.

When I saw the title of chapter five, "Evangelism Ceases After Launch," my first thought was I agree, and was eager to hear the response. However, when I read the chapter I realized the authors' *primary* emphasis is inviting people to a worship event, rather than the need for the church planters (and the church) to go into the highways and hedges to share the gospel. To their credit, the authors note that evangelism is far more than "inviting people to church" (48) and "inviting people to your church is one thing; inviting them to Christ is another. It's a heart thing" (51). However, their lack of a clear explanation of what they mean by evangelism and the emphasis on inviting people, detracts from the title of their chapter (and the fact that the biblical definition of church planting is evangelism that results in new churches) For example, they write,

- "You must think of your church as a missional outpost, perched on the edge of occupied territory. The missional outpost exists as a community whose primary goal is to live out the Great Commandment in a way that people who are invited into the community experience the love of God in a redeeming way" (48).
- "We don't like the 'E' word, *evangelism*, because it has so much baggage. It's also a scary issue for most people. We prefer the word *invite*. Even though inviting people is still scary to most people, the word is not nearly as frightening as the word *evangelism*. . . . So what we want is for people to invite their networks to 'come and see' what you're doing" (49).

A better title for this chapter would have been "Inviting People Ceases After Launch." Near the end of the chapter, the matter becomes clearer. They note: "That's why we think the best metaphor for a church is a 'missionary outpost' whose mission is to invade and infect occupied territory with the good news, and from that develop a community whose purpose in life is to continue changing the area around them. . . ." I agree to a point here, but then they include, "When the launch team begins to practice the DNA of inviting people before the launch and to experience the joy of seeing their invitees respond, they will more likely continue this behavior after the launch" (56).

In chapter seven, "Fear of Talking about Money Until It is Too Late," the authors rightly tell church planters to educate people on proper stewardship (another strength of the book). However, statements such as the following reveal the deep ecclesiological problem in American church planting circles:

- "Terry made two devastating mistakes: she had underestimated the cost of growing the church to viability, and she had avoided asking people for money" (76). My immediate question is, what is viability? Again, another question to ask

- is what was viability in the first century? And how much money was needed for a church to be viable then?
- “The bottom line is: Growth has to be fed. . . with money, and many church planters severely underestimate the financial appetite a growing church possesses” (78).
 - “Often the supervisory agency is the only entity invested in the church plant. When this is the case, the odds of the church plant failing are greatly increased. The more investors in the church plant the more likely it is to succeed” (81). I ask: what is failure? What did failure look like in the first century—I don’t recall money being an issue related to failure? Maybe our definition of a church is different today?

In chapter eight, “Failure of the Church to Act Its Age and Its Size,” the authors challenge church planters and new churches to be who they are. Instead of attempting to act like a much larger congregation, new churches must use what they have received. Such is an excellent point in the book. Closely related to this matter is the last chapter, “Using the ‘Superstar’ Model as the Paradigm for All Church Plants.” Here the authors challenge church planters to refrain from buying into someone else’s vision, but allow the context to influence the work. While this point is a strength of the book, I must add the authors’ have both directly and indirectly argued for a particular model of church planting throughout the book, one that is typically based on a planter who will pastor the new church and will use a core group and launch methodology, involving large amounts of money and a high level of communication skills, leadership skills and talents—a model that many “superstars” use.

A strength of chapter nine, “Formalizing Leadership too Soon,” is that the authors warn church planters about who they place in positions of leadership. They note that leaders should prove themselves first. This is excellent material here.

While I recognize this review has been a mixed one regarding the book *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made By New Church Starts*, the authors accomplished exactly what they stated they would do in the book: to educate the reader on the ten most common mistakes today. While I believe they did cover some of the common mistakes, I must quickly add that I believe many of these are the *surface level* mistakes, reflecting a much deeper problem. Because of this matter, my critique of this book is also a critique of much North American church planting. Church planters today have a problem answering the questions “What is the local church?” and “What is necessary for the local church to exist, at any time, any place, and among any people in the world?” When these two questions are answered from a *biblical* starting point, we begin to get to the heart of biblical church planting and all that is necessary to plant churches. Such churches will obviously look differently depending on their contexts. Are the ten most common mistakes mentioned by Griffith and Easum accurate? Probably so, as church planting in America presently stands. But whenever a church planter begins from the wrong starting point, the mistakes made can only be traced back to that improper starting point—not to



the correct starting point where he should have started from. And we must remember these are the “ten *most common* mistakes.” So, what does that tell us?