

“Ethical Guidelines for Church Planters: A Suggested Proposal”

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It is rare to hear the words “church planting” and “ethics” used in the same sentence. In fact, over the past decade, I cannot recall a single conversation with church planters when I heard anyone mention ethics when discussing such missionary activity. This lack of discussion does not imply church planters are a group of intentionally unprincipled barbarians roaming to and fro throughout the earth, seeking people whom they can devour. The hundreds of church planters I have encountered over the years love God and love others, and manifest godly lifestyles.

However, a discussion of ethics and church planting is long overdue, particularly related to the missionary practices being used. This paper contains my reflections based upon observations over the last decade. And though I recognize that by writing such a paper, I am serving as a provocateur, challenging well-established contemporary philosophical and methodological paradigms, I must add that I do not write to create unhealthy discord. Rather, I write with the hopes for healthy change.

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Contained within the following pages is a suggested proposal of ethical guidelines for church planters that attempts to hold missionaries to a theological and missiological accountability that is conducive to the multiplication of disciples, leaders, and churches across the globe. At present, many church planting strategies lack a genuine Great Commission integrity, that is focused beyond the planting of a single congregation. This paper addresses the ethical problems where such missionary practices deviate from a Kingdom Ethic, which fosters the birth and multiplication of healthy churches. Though the suggestion of ethical guidelines may seem strange to some, it should be remembered that other ministerial groups have developed their own ethical guidelines. For example, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has “A Code of Ethics for Christian Witness” on their web site.² At the 1999 Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists approved a 10-point code of ethics.³ And The Association of Professional Chaplains have certification privileges that require the adoption of a particular code of ethics.⁴

The Kingdom Ethic.

Life in the Kingdom of God is life lived by a Kingdom Ethic. Such an ethic transcends the ethic of this world. For example, in the Kingdom, lust is equated with adultery and hatred with murder (Matt 5:21-22, 27-28). The first is last (Mark 9:35), and the servant is the greatest (Mark 10:44) of all. Our Lord stated, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15). The calling to be a Kingdom Citizen is a calling

²See https://www.intervarsity.org/slj/fa00/fa00_code_of_ethics.html; accessed 3/12/09.

³See <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.org/sbc99/news50.htm>; accessed 3/12/09.

⁴See http://www.professionalchaplains.org/uploadedFiles/pdf/code_of_ethics_2003.pdf; accessed 3/12/09.

to walk as Jesus walked (Col 2:6). Even the Apostle Paul called the new believers in the newly planted churches to imitate him as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1).

In essence, the Kingdom Ethic tells Kingdom Citizens how to live in relation to God (Matt 22:37), to other Kingdom Citizens (John 13:35, 15:12, cf. Matt 22:39), and to those outside of the Kingdom (Matt 22:39). Ministerial practices are *not* outside the jurisdiction of the Kingdom. Such an ethic applies to all of life, including what the Church has come to describe as the ministerial life as well. For missionaries, this ethic also addresses their church planting approaches.

A failure to follow the Kingdom Ethic is a failure to be faithful to the King from whom the Kingdom Ethic extends. The Kingdom Ethic is a way a life for the Kingdom Citizen. Such life is lived according to the grace of God that enables one to accomplish good works (Eph 2:10) and bear much fruit (John 15:1-11) for the glory of the King. Such life is lived from the King's grace in that, the Kingdom Citizen is one who loves Jesus and keeps His commandments (John 14:15). The way of life is the way of Jesus. Just as Kingdom citizens received him, they must continue to walk as Jesus did (Col 2:6). Since life in the Kingdom consists of being a slave (Matt 25:14-30), a good steward (Luke 12:35-48) of the King's resources as well as making most of the time and opportunities (Col 4:5; Eph 5:16), and walking in wisdom (Eph 5:15), *freedom with missionary practices should only be permitted to the extent that proper stewardship, faithfulness, and wisdom are not compromised for a lesser good.*

Missionary practices are ethical reflections of biblical foundations. Orthopraxy must be driven by orthodoxy. Poor missionary practices are not simply poor practices

but rather a lack of integrity and a neglect of the moral duty and proper stewardship of a Kingdom citizen.

The Matters of Concern

There are two matters of concern that have influenced me to suggest the need for the establishment of such ethical guidelines. First, church planting is a very difficult ministry. The spiritual warfare is great and intensive. The challenges of starting something from nothing are numerous. Second, and closely related to the first matter is the fact that because such ministry is so challenging, church planters many times succumb to numerous temptations to shortcut the work of the Spirit in the birth and healthy growth and multiplication of churches.

In the face of great spiritual opposition and ministerial challenges, church planters are many times faced with the temptation to accomplish something *good* for the Kingdom at the sacrifice of accomplishing something *great* for the Kingdom. Faced with funding resources that diminish over time, lack of receptivity of people to the gospel, the pressures to start a public worship service and produce certain numbers at a worship gathering (pressures either from external factors such as supervisors, partnering churches, etc. or pressures from internal factors such as insecurity, fear, need to prove something, etc.), many times lead missionaries down a path that deviates from biblically based and missiologically guided church multiplication strategies. Therefore, this suggestion of a twelve point code of ethics is designed to keep missionaries properly focused and engaged, especially when the challenges come.

12 Components for a Code of Ethics

In light of many of the challenges that distract church planters from healthy missionary practices, I have written this paper to suggest some of the components that should be included in a church planter's code of ethics. To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to set forth such a proposal.

Such a standard of ethical practice is suggested with both the welfare of the church planters *and* the new churches in mind. First, such a standard is a means to assist church planters in their walk with the Lord. It is written to aid in the planters' own sanctification by keeping a Kingdom Ethic in place to which they can align their ministries, especially before the days of difficulty arrive, when the temptations to make compromises also come. Second, this standard of ethical practice is designed to assist church planters in planting churches that are healthy from their births, for this is an attempt to assist church planters in presenting everyone fully mature in Christ (Col 1:28).

The following section outlines twelve points of action that should serve as the minimum amount of content for such a code of ethics. I do not claim that such is an exhaustive list. However, I do believe the following twelve points allow missionaries to maintain the necessary philosophical and methodological freedom in which to fulfill their callings, while simultaneously establishing healthy biblical and missiological parameters in light of the Kingdom Ethic. Such a code of ethics is not restricting but rather liberating, while attempting to assist church planters in not substituting good missionary practices for the best missionary practices.

Guideline #1: Since the Great Commission is a command and the global need for the gospel is so great, unless God reveals otherwise, we will begin our ministry among people with the greatest need and with a high level of receptivity to the gospel.

It is an unethical practice to begin laboring in areas where there is little need for additional evangelicals and low levels of receptivity while there are four billion people in the world who are not believers and have little to no access to the gospel. Knowing that church planters are called to make disciples first and *not* plant churches, all church planters must have the world as their parish (Matt 28:18-20). Church planters must think both locally and globally as they develop strategies for church multiplication. Failure to integrate local strategies with global strategies is a matter of poor stewardship.

The gospel travels faster and farther and rapidly produces fruit in areas among peoples who are more receptive to that message than those who are more resistant. *Unless there is a strong calling of God to labor elsewhere*, the proper approach by church planters should be to labor where the Spirit is working with those desiring to know more about Jesus. It is unethical to do otherwise.

Donald A. McGavran once noted that receptivity to the gospel was similar to the ocean tides. He wrote, "One thing is clear, receptivity wanes as often as it waxes. Like the tide, it comes in and goes out. Unlike the tide, no one can guarantee when it goes out that it will soon come back again."⁵

Though it is known that no one comes to the Father except through the work of the Spirit (John 3:8; 6:36), what is not known is when the regenerative act will occur.

⁵Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 218.

For example, a man may be receptive to the gospel over a period of several months, however he may later become resistant to the gospel for the next twenty years, only to become more receptive once again near the end of his life. Someone in the Kingdom shares the gospel with him and he decides to follow Jesus, but only after years of debauchery since the first time he was receptive to the truth. Yet, what if the gospel would have been presented to him twenty years earlier when he was initially receptive? He may have come to faith then, with twenty years of faithful Kingdom service, including the preaching of the gospel across his circles of influence. Unless the Lord leads church planters to a hard soil area, the ethically appropriate direction in service is to prioritize labors among the most receptive and most evangelically needy. It is unethical to neglect those asking the question of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30) when others are cursing the name of Christ.

Guideline #2: Since the world consists of four billion unbelievers, with two billion who have never heard the gospel, our strategy will involve the use of church planting methods that are highly reproducible by the people.

Ecclesiology and missionary practices built upon a foundation of paternalism that hinders the birth and multiplication of contextualized churches, does not take the global aspect of the Great Commission with the utmost seriousness. It is an unethical practice for missionaries to model before new believers and churches that complex and highly technical methods are required for church planting activities, for such methods are generally difficult to reproduce. Charles Brock is correct when he notes, “In an age when perhaps more than four billion people do not know Christ in a personal way, it borders on

immorality for a planter to plant a church without considering reproducibility.”⁶ For church planters to speak of some day in the distant future when new churches are capable of carrying out the task of church planting, because such activities are too complicated for them in the immediate future, reveals a conviction that is not derived from the Kingdom Ethic.

Guideline #3: Since biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches, we will not prioritize transfer growth over conversion growth by designing ministries that will primarily attract believers.

Biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches. Church planters are missionaries, following after the apostolic paradigm modeled by Jesus and the Apostolic Church. Though not all transfer growth is bad (e.g., someone moves into a new city due to a job transfer and desires to be a part of a church), it should not be the primarily or even secondary concern for church planters. In fact, the team should not even desire transfer growth. Church planting is about making disciples, impacting the kingdom of darkness, seeing people become Kingdom citizens living according to the Kingdom Ethic as a part of local churches. Church planters are to have the desire of the Apostle Paul: to not build upon another man’s foundation (Rom 15:20).

Church planting is not about attracting a crowd or launching a worship service, but rather it is about the advancement of the Kingdom as unbelievers become followers of the living God through local expressions of the Body of Christ. Though crowd attraction and starting a new worship service are not necessarily bad things, their

⁶Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 25.

manifestations, however, do not necessarily mean the Kingdom has advanced. In many cases, such events actually attract large numbers of Kingdom Citizens. For church planters to settle for large numbers of transfer growth is not the way of the Apostolic Church.

Guideline #4: Since unity among churches in a geographical area is a powerful witness to the gospel, we will be concerned with other evangelical pastors laboring in the same area as our team, and will take the initiative to meet with them to share our calling and vision.

Jesus prayed that His church would be unified (John 17:11, 23) and noted that the world would know His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). A spirit of division, competition, resentment, or hostility between believers, hinders sanctification in the Body of Christ and Kingdom expansion. Therefore, whenever church planters enter into new areas where other evangelical churches are present, such church planters need to take the initiative to meet and share their callings with the pastors of those churches.

In an informal study I conducted a few years ago of 190 church planters, I discovered that one of the five most critical issues they faced was the issue of “turfism”—the attitude of established churches that a particular geographical area was their turf and that church planters moving into their area were considered a threat to their established ministries. Though some pastors who are insecure in their positions in Christ will see the church planting team as a threat regardless of any attempt made to alleviate any fears, at least the team will have made the good effort to live at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14).

At least three matters should be addressed during such a meeting with local evangelical pastors. First, a copy of a church planter's ethical guidelines should be provided to the church leaders. A document such as this will allow them to see the ethical guidelines the church planters are following for Kingdom expansion. Second, it should be communicated that the church planters subscribe to a definition of biblical church planting (i.e., evangelism that results in new churches). Third, it should be shared that the church planting team does not want to compete with the other churches in the area for their members and that a specific protocol will be followed if any of the established church members attempt to become a part of the new church (see Guideline #5).

Guideline #5: Since we desire to respect other evangelical pastors in the area, desire biblical church planting practices, and desire sanctification in the lives of any transfers from local churches, we will have a systematic plan to respond to the transfers who want to become part of the new church.

It is very important that a church planting team have a plan in place to address the issue of transfer growth. Even for the church planters who are doing everything possible to discourage transfer growth, they will encounter it. Particularly in the North American context, members of other churches will be interested in the new work. Some of these brothers and sisters will have a genuine desire to serve in a new work. Others, however, will be of the massive consumerist crowd looking for the most novel thing in town. These "new-experience Christians" will remain as long as their desires are met. Like parasites on a living organism, they participate to take, until they get their fill or until something else comes along to satisfy their desires. Rather, than understanding who they

are in Christ, and their place in the work of the ministry (Eph 4:12), they believe that following Christ is an individualistic, self-gratifying, desire-meeting experience void of biblical *koinonia*. Regardless of the motivation behind any local church members wanting to be a part of the new work, it is unethical for a church planting team (and the new churches) to receive them as members without regard for their local church family in which they are presently involved in a covenant relationship.

So what is a suggested protocol that a team should follow in relation to the issue of transfers? When encountering transfer growth, the church planting team should find out what evangelical church the person is a member of in the community, and why the person desires to leave that fellowship. The people are to be informed that their pastor(s) need to be consulted on this matter. Second, the team should contact the pastors of the church with the name of the member, inquiring as to why he or she would desire to leave the fellowship of their church and pastor(s). Third, the person should only be allowed to become a part of the new work only after being discouraged from leaving their church and only with their pastor(s) and church's blessing, and only if all three of the parties believe that the prompting for such a move is from the Lord.⁷

Guideline #6: Since the Lord is the One Who calls us to service and promised to build His Church in His way on His timetable, we will not allow our callings and service for the King to be governed by money, time, or pressure to perform to man's standards.

⁷Often I hear church planters ask, "But what if the person's church isn't a gospel-preaching church?" Clearly, if the church is portraying itself as an evangelical church, but is heterodox, then the transfer of the member is obviously justified. However, I strongly believe that heterodoxy is not always the case, but rather the new work in the area is offering a "better flavor" or "brand" of church, with better music, better preaching (not more biblical), and better programs—ironically, things that appeal to people with a church background in their lives, rather than unbelievers.

Knowing that the sands in the hourglass of income are quickly running out, many church planters begin well but decide to shortcut the work of the ministry due to lack of funds. Models of successful growth (albeit with much transfer growth) from other parts of the country are advocated by many as the norm, with the expectation that other church planters must do likewise. Like an investment in a flourishing company, ministry supporters and supervisors sometimes believe their investments must always produce their desired results in their desired time. The Ethic of the Kingdom, however, supercedes the Ethic of the economy of this world. For example, the widow's two mites were worth more than all of the large sums of money from the wealthy (Mark 12:42). What may appear insignificant in the eyes of man is great in the Kingdom of God.

In times when the work is not progressing at the desired rate, church planters must ask, "What is the Spirit doing among these people?" And a second, follow up question should be, "Is it possible that the work of the Spirit among these people may take longer than we expected?" It is a deviation from the Kingdom Ethic to be guided by someone other than the Spirit. Missionaries must remember that the timetable of God is not based on man's expectations and demands. Such an understanding should not prevent church planters from establishing goals to be accomplished in a designated period of time. However, it must be remembered that all such planning is dependent upon the will of God (Jas 4:15-16). The Apostle Paul made definite plans to take the gospel into Asia Minor and Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7), but had his plans interrupted by the Spirit.

Guideline #7: Since our calling to this ministry, people, and location is from God and not based on money, we will not end our church planting ministry in this area simply if our financial support ends, but rather will make appropriate plans for the future of our personal finances.

If God has called a team to a particular area, then leaving the ministry apart from God's leadership is a direct violation of the Kingdom Ethic. Though historically God has moved people and their ministries as a result of economic forces, such is not always the case.⁸ Church planting teams must strategize in light of the question, "What if our funding ends?", long before any such funding comes to an end. If the team only has three years of funding, then before they begin their work, they must ask the question, "How will we provide for ourselves and families in three years?" Avoidance of such a question with the attitude, "God will provide," may simply be a lack of wisdom masquerading as faith. God will provide . . . but what if He wants the team members to get jobs in the community? Is the team and the new churches ready for such a change in schedules and availability after three years of "full time service"? For such a change would require substantial adjustments in their calendars.

Based on my informal research of 190 individuals involved in church planting in North America, the most critical personal issue facing church planters today is that of the lack of financial resources. While I believe that though there is some legitimacy to such a need, much of this matter stems from a poor ecclesiology. That is, many church planters begin their labors with a culturally defined understanding of a local church, rather than a biblically defined understanding of the local church.

⁸For example, on the early American frontier, many Baptists and Methodist churches were planted as a result of such believers moving westward to make a living for their families.

Guideline #8: Since the biblical model for church planting is a team approach and many possible liabilities come when working as a solo church planter, a team will be developed before the work begins.

Whenever church planters “go at it alone” they fail to follow in the model set forth in the Scriptures of a team approach. This lone ranger approach to missions creates an ethical dilemma that raises the potential for missiological malpractice. Though I am certain that over the years solo missionaries have planted many healthy churches, such an approach is potentially problematic: It sets the church planter up for potential burn out because he lacks the ability to divide up the ministry labors. It sets him up for potential discouragement, because he lacks a teammate to provide encouragement. It sets him up for a lack of accountability because he has no one to hold him accountable. Since intensive spiritual warfare is to be expected in such missionary labors, wise is the church planter who takes every precaution to alleviate the future problems. Why would anyone, undertaking so great a task related to Kingdom expansion, attempt to do otherwise?

Guideline #9: Since one of the most critical issues in missionary circles is that of the stress on the family, we will not neglect our families for the sake of church planting and will begin our work with a strategy for nurturing our family life while serving as church planters.

Whether based on widespread facts or anecdotal evidence, there is an understanding that ministers are notorious for neglecting their families for the sake of the ministry. There is enough anecdotal evidence to inform church planters that they should be aware of this problem and prepare accordingly. Of all people serving the Body of Christ, I believe church planters are very susceptible to giving into this temptation. Such

missionaries not only have the normal pressures of ministry, but they are working to create something from nothing, a daunting task in itself.

The church planting family establishes an example for the new believers and churches to follow. *Therefore, a church planting family does not have to be next to perfect, they have to be perfect.* If the family falls due to neglect, the ministry falls even harder. Like the ever-expanding ripples on a calm pond that come after a rock is tossed into the middle, the impact of the news of the collapse of the family will grow and extend well beyond the church planter's home, beyond the new believers, and beyond the immediate community.

A failure to adequately prepare one's family for such labors, and to maintain a healthy ministry that involves the continual shepherding of one's family for their growth in Christ, is reflective of a person more concerned with accomplishing the ministerial task of planting a church and not living according to a Kingdom Ethic (1 Tim 3:4-5).

Guideline #10: Since we are Kingdom Citizens, we will not neglect our daily devotion time with the Lord by allowing ourselves to be distracted by the numerous needs and tasks to be accomplished in the church planting labors.

The Lord does not need us for His work; he can find someone else if we are unfaithful to him. He desires obedience rather than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). One of the greatest ironies concerning the ministry is that many church planters believe there is so much to do for the Lord that they do not have time to spend with the Lord. They find themselves too busy to pray, to be still, and to maintain daily devotions at the feet of Jesus. Whenever the demands of the church planting ministry detract from the church

planters' devotion time, an ethical dilemma exists. Whenever church planters begin to substitute building the church for spending time with the One Who promised to Build His Church, the ministry is being built upon sand.

Guideline #11: Since the task of missionary work involves effective communication, we will work diligently toward contextualization rather than bringing our preferred church traditions to the people.

The contextualization of the gospel is always a challenging matter, with some situations more difficult than others. In order to communicate effectively, church planters may find themselves laboring in an area for some time prior to experiencing the first converts and birth of new churches. For example, it was thirty-three years after missionaries first brought the gospel to the Ao people of Nagaland before the first church was planted.⁹

One of the temptations church planters face is to practice paternalism rather than contextualization. Paternalism manifests itself as an attitude of superiority rather than that of humility. Practically, it manifests itself with the church planters knowing the "best" culture for a church, with that culture generally being their own preferences, and thereby attempting to import such cultural preferences onto the new believers. Rather than teaching the people how to understand themselves to be the Body of Christ in their context and to function appropriately according to the scriptures, a paternalistic approach elevates the "church preferences" of the church planters above biblical revelation and teaches the new believers to rely on the missionaries rather than the Spirit and the Word.

⁹Paul Hattaway, *From Headhunters to Church Planters: An Amazing Spiritual Awakening in Nagaland* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Publishing, 2006), 13, 14.

For example, many church planters begin with a mental picture of a church that has a well-developed superstructure of organization and programs. Rather, than reaching people from the harvest and teaching them how to be the body of Christ in their local community—thus allowing the structures to develop from the people and grow with the people—many teams attempt to put the cart before the horse. They create the structures and try to make the people fit into such organization. The result? The people have no biblical or missiological foundation for the structures, do not own the structures, cannot financially support them, and are not qualified to provide oversight for them. The multiplication possibilities are hindered. Like a child who is only able to wear a size 4 shoe, yet being fitted with a size 15, and taught that such an approach to “shoe life” is the normal way, church planters many times create the structures and culture, communicate to the people that such actions are appropriate practice, and become frustrated whenever the people do not sustain the organization over a period of time. Such missiological malpractice is unethical for it substitutes missionary preferences for teaching a biblical ecclesiology.

Another unhealthy approach to church planting that many times takes precedence over contextualization is that of pragmatism—the philosophy of whatever works to accomplish the goal is what should be done. Though all followers of Jesus should be pragmatic to a degree—we are told to make disciples, therefore, we want to know what works to accomplish this task—taken too far, pragmatism becomes unethical. For pragmatism hijacks the normal learning process of the new believers. Church planters so eager to see results many times do whatever works to get a church started. Pragmatism

also has the tendency to result in an unhealthy dependency of the new churches toward the church planters.

Guideline #12: Since integrity and accuracy are important when reporting statistics related to our missionary labors, we will strive to report only those numbers and descriptive details which are truly reflective of what the Holy Spirit is doing in our context.

The intentional reporting of inaccurate numbers related to a team's ministry is unethical. It is deceptive and makes God out to be a liar, by providing reports that bear false witness against His Spirit. Missionaries must speak the truth (Eph 4:25). Space will not permit a discussion of the passages related to liars; however, it should be known that the Bible never portrays such people in a favorable light (1 Ti 1:10; 1 Ti 4:2; Tit 1:12). Though all statistical reporting must be done without reproach, particular care must be taken in reporting numbers related to baptisms and churches planted.

An evangelistic gathering is not a church. A Bible study is not a church either, even if that study consists of baptized believers. A worship service is not a church. And church planters must not report such groups as churches. They may call them Bible studies, seeker studies, seed groups, community groups, preaching points, worship gatherings, but must not describe them local churches. Unless the baptized group of believers has agreed (e.g., covenanted) to exist and function as the local expression of the Body of Christ, with all the rights and responsibilities appertaining to themselves according to the Scriptures, then they are not a church.

In light of the fact there are many good things to report from the field, in addition to baptisms and new churches, church planters (and their supervisors) need to make

certain that categories exist in which they accurately report the number of Bible studies, seeker groups, worship gatherings, seed groups, etc. that have been started.

Also, accurate reporting must extend beyond the simple reporting of raw numbers, such is especially important in areas that are not highly receptive to the gospel. Missionaries should provide a “thick description” of what the Holy Spirit is doing among the people. Stories need to be shared. This is not to advocate that missionary reporting must be akin to writing the next *War and Peace*, but rather brief tales from the trenches need to be communicated regularly and consistently from the field. Such stories, particularly when the numerical growth is slow, will encourage both the missionary teams as well as those who read and hear their reports.

Conclusion

The above guidelines are suggestions to be included in a code of ethics for church planters. To my knowledge, such a code does not exist. However, Kingdom Citizens are called to live according to a Kingdom Ethic. This divine ethic is not simply concerned with matters of avoiding acts such as adultery, fornication, lying, murder, but this ethic touches all of life. For church planters, the Kingdom Ethic especially speaks to matters related to their missionary practices, philosophies, methods, and doctrine.