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THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CHURCH PLANTING

Introduction

Christ extends the gospel through His Spirit by the planting of new churches. The Spirit's role must be rightly understood and appreciated, lest we hinder His work by our ignorance of it. Unfortunately, for the most part there has not been a great deal of focus upon the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting. According to Rolland Allen, "Missionary work as an expression of the Holy Spirit has received such slight and casual attention that it might almost escape the notice of a hasty reader. A few strong expressions here and there incidentally introduced do not satisfy the case."¹ As the life-giving force of the church, it is regrettable that the role of the Holy Spirit has not been given more attention in discussions regarding missions and the planting of new churches. While one paper upon the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting cannot possibly do the subject all the justice it deserves, it is the goal of this paper to discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting and point out some of the implications for church planting methodology.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit gives life and vitality to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ; the planting of churches cannot take place apart from His guiding and empowering work. Any comprehensive discussion concerning church planting must give attention to the role of the Holy

¹Roland Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006), 21

Spirit in the establishing of New Testament churches, to do otherwise would be to disregard an essential element of planting new churches. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life and it is through His life-giving power that new churches are birthed.

Evangelism

The Holy Spirit leads and empowers believers to share the gospel with others. Jesus told the disciples before His ascension, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus told the disciples they would be empowered for witnessing through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Those who came to put their faith in Jesus Christ were then baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41), and as the gospel spread geographically new churches were planted.

The Holy Spirit leads believers to do evangelism, which results in church planting. In the book of Acts, evangelism that led to the planting of new churches was “the free, natural outflow of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Christians.”² The filling of the Holy Spirit naturally led to the bold proclamation and spread of the gospel (Acts 2:4; 4:8-12, 31; 7:55-56; 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Peter 1:12). Donald McGavran has pointed out that when God chooses to move among His people He sends revival through the work of His Spirit.

Revival implants Christ’s Spirit in men and forthwith they, like their Master, make bringing salvation to men a chief purpose of their lives... Like those indwelt at Pentecost, they go everywhere preaching the Word. They seek to win men to Christ. The good life they now enjoy they ardently wish others to experience.³

²John T. Seamands, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Church Growth.” in *God, Man and Church Growth*, ed. A. R. Tippett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 103-4.

³Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 192.

Evangelism is the natural outflow of a life that is yielded to, controlled by, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

The chief function of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church is to lead it to expand through the proclamation of the gospel.⁴ The Holy Spirit brings glory to the Son and the Father by prodding the church to proclaim the good news. The Holy Spirit, therefore, gives believers the motivation and desire to do evangelism. A desire in the heart of a believer to spread the gospel is a sign of the ministry and filling of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. Rolland Allen has noted,

Now the Spirit which inspires and directs a certain action must necessarily be a Spirit whose nature is such that this action is agreeable to Him and expresses His mind. The history of the spread of the gospel must, then, be a revelation of the mind of the Spirit; the zeal of the apostles must be a revelation of the nature of the Spirit which inspired them to such action.⁵

The natural result of the Holy Spirit's ministry within the church is the spontaneous expansion of the gospel which leads to the planting of new churches.

The Holy Spirit convicts sinners of their sin and their need for Christ. Jesus told His disciples that when the Holy Spirit "has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment; of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged" (John 16:8-11). As church planters go out and proclaim the gospel they can trust in the convicting work of the Holy Spirit who convicts sinners, points them to the righteousness of Christ, and warns them of God's judgment against sin and those who practice it. Rolland Allen has stated, "The Holy Spirit is revealed in the Acts as the teacher of the need of men for Christ,

⁴ Talmadge R. Amberson, *The Birth of Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 169.

⁵ Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit*, 20.

because He illuminates men so that they see Christ, and know Christ for themselves.”⁶ Sinners come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Forming New Churches

The Holy Spirit brings persons to Christ, but He does not leave them in isolation; He forms new local churches with those who have been. Talmadge Amberson has said, “There is no such thing as a free-lance Christianity, a Christianity apart from churches.”⁷ Evangelism must not be separated from church planting because the Holy Spirit works in and through the church. We must resist the temptation of “so personalizing the Holy Spirit that we miss the collective and church-centered work of the Spirit.”⁸ An assumption evident through the New Testament is that “an important goal of evangelism is the incorporation of new believers into church communities.”⁹ An inevitable goal of witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit is the planting of new churches.

Guiding and Directing

The Holy Spirit is active in guiding and directing the mission of church planting. In Acts 16:6-7 it says Paul, Silas, and Timothy “were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them.” Later on in verse 10 we are told, “We sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.” The Holy Spirit clearly directs the spread of

⁶Ibid., 35.

⁷Amberson, *The Birth of Churches*, 171.

⁸Denton Lotz, “The Holy Spirit and Establishing Churches,” in *Five Till Midnight: Church Planting for A.D. 2000 and Beyond*, ed. Tony Cupit (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, 1994), 5.

⁹Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsville, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 71.

the gospel and the planting of churches. The Holy Spirit directed Paul and Silas in their church planting journey, and immediately after we are told of this revelation, we are told of the planting of a church in Philippi.

Church planters must seek the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit in their church planting endeavors and strategies because “Jesus through the Spirit directs the processes of evangelization, church planting, and church growth, often against human inclination and logic.”¹⁰ Church planting can never be reduced to the use and application of church growth principles and demographic analysis because it is first and foremost a work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. At the same time, however, the work of the Holy Spirit does not negate the use of sound research and good principles; the Holy Spirit works through the use of human endeavors and the Holy Spirit’s use of means does not undermine His role in church planting. In fact, God’s use of frail human instrumentality in accomplishing His work more fully demonstrates the Spirit’s power and glory.

Calling out church planters

The Holy Spirit calls out church planters from among existing churches as His chosen agents for extending the gospel. We know from the book of Acts that God called out Paul and Barnabas from the church at Antioch in order to spread the gospel and establish churches in new areas. Acts 13:2-4 says, “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” At times, the Holy Spirit calls

¹⁰Reginaldo Krukliis, “Christ, the Source and Goal of Church Planting,” in *Five Till Midnight: Church Planting for A.D. 2000 and Beyond*, ed. Tony Cupit (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, 1994), 13.

individuals to the specific task of planting churches and He calls upon local churches to send them out.

Overseers and Leaders

The Holy Spirit raises up overseers and leaders within the new churches that He plants. Paul said to the elders of the church at Ephesus, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Ultimately, the raising up of leaders for new church is the task of the Holy Spirit. While the apostle Paul held a unique role as an apostle over the church at Ephesus, he recognized that the Holy Spirit had set aside specific leaders to serve in the office of pastor.

Equipping new believers with spiritual gifts

The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to new believers for the edification of the church. 1 Cor. 12:7 says, “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... but one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.” The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gift to new believers according to the will of Christ, and uses those gifts to build up the body of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the work of Christ because “the work of the Holy Spirit in the church is the work of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church.”¹¹

Unity

The Holy Spirit brings unity to the church of God. In Ephesians 4:3-4 Paul encourages the church of Ephesus to endeavor to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is

¹¹Amberson, *The Birth of Churches*, 167.

one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling.” When believers are walking in the Spirit, it results in a sense of unity, fellowship, and love for one another (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1-2; Gal. 5:22). Conflict and division within new church plants is not of the Holy Spirit.

Church Planting Methodology

Pneumatology has huge implications for church planting methodology. Methodologies which ignore or negate the role of the Holy Spirit must be rejected and those which acknowledge His role in the planting of churches must be embraced. As previously noted, the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting has been largely overlooked; therefore, the role of the Holy Spirit has not be adequately considered in evaluating church planting methodologies. Any methodology that overlooks or inadvertently dismisses the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting runs the risk of thwarting His work and damaging the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spreading the gospel through church planting

If the chief function of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church is to lead it to extension,¹² then church planting should be a priority for every church claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the spreading of the gospel to areas and places it has not reached. When persons are brought to Christ, then those believers are to form a local church that will be led by the Holy Spirit of God. Church planting methodologies must always focus upon the ultimate priority of making disciples of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Church planters must keep in mind that the goal of church planting is not simply to have another church in existence, but to see persons saved from

¹²Ibid., 169.

their sins by coming to know Jesus Christ, something that can only happen through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Church plants must adopt a “go and tell” approach to evangelism because the Holy Spirit leads individuals to witness to Christ. The filling of the Holy Spirit leads to the bold proclamation of the gospel. Perhaps one of the reasons many churches lack the power of the Holy Spirit is they have neglected personal evangelism. Many church planting methodologies adopt a “come and see” approach to evangelism. The “come and see” approach is not wrong and should not be discarded, but it should not replace the personal responsibility of the individual to do evangelism. Anything less than personal evangelism quenches the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the members of a church plant. If evangelism is the natural outflow of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within a person’s life, then personal evangelism should be an expectation of every member. The relegating of evangelism to the worship service or to an event limits and undermines the role of the Holy Spirit in leading new believers to do evangelism.

Calling out the called

Churches should seek to recognize those whom the Holy Spirit has called to be sent out for church planting and help them in their calling. The Holy Spirit that called Paul and Barnabas out of the church of Antioch is the same Holy Spirit that calls out church planters today. Churches should expect the Holy Spirit to call believers to the task of church planting. There should be a constant invitation for members of the church to respond to the calling of the Holy Spirit to be a church planter.

As churches are led by the Holy Spirit to send leaders out to plant churches, they should not be concerned with losing key leaders. The Holy Spirit told the church at Antioch “that the two men who were to be released for what we should nowadays call missionary service overseas

were the two most eminent and gifted leaders in the church.”¹³ A church that is led by the Holy Spirit and seeking His guidance and leadership will not be concerned with who He calls out for church planting because it is His prerogative to do what He chooses with those who belong to Him. However, it is the churches responsibility to seek the will of Christ through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Letting Leaders Lead

The Holy Spirit raises leaders up for the new churches He plants. He calls them, equips them, and leads them. Other churches and organizations must therefore acknowledge the authority given by the Holy Spirit to the overseer(s) of new churches and not do anything to undermine the Holy Spirit’s leading of a new church. At times, it is possible for church planters or perhaps the mother church to undermine the working of the Holy Spirit by undermining the authority He has given to the new pastor(s) of the church. It is possible for us to acknowledge that the Spirit of God has fitted a man for a position of authority, but him not be able to occupy it because we get in the way.¹⁴ Church planters and mother churches must give the leaders of a new church the freedom to exercise the authority the Holy Spirit has given them by putting them in the office of overseer. There should not be outside overseers overseeing the person or persons the Holy Spirit has placed as the overseer(s) of the new church.

Praying

Any church planting strategy that does not heavily involve prayer is ignoring the role of the Holy Spirit and must be reevaluated and amended to include prayer as a central aspect of

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 261.

¹⁴ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 143.

church planting. Peter Wagner has said, “Many of our technical church growth principles could be used to grow fast food restaurants or insurance companies or tire stores. These can succeed without prayer because they are human institutions. Churches cannot.”¹⁵ In order for a church plant to be successful it must be bathed in prayer because only the Holy Spirit can bring persons to repentance through His regenerating power. Churches need to pray that God will call out church planters, provide the resources necessary, direct them, and enable them to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer strips believers of self-dependency and self-sufficiency, allowing them to depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit. God uses prayer as a means by which He fills believers with the Holy Spirit. Donald McGavran has said, “we may say that when, driven by their own powerlessness, men turn to God and devote themselves to prayer, He pours out the Holy Spirit on them.”¹⁶ A healthy understanding of the Holy Spirit leads church planters and their new churches to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit.

Planting churches, not buildings or methodologies

The Holy Spirit births churches and He is not reliant upon land, buildings, or man-made methodologies. The local church is “brought about by the Holy Spirit long before it needs to have buildings, extensive programs, choirs, etc.”¹⁷ A proper understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit can help in one’s understanding of what the church is and what it is not. A church is not somehow less of a church when it does not have a building or a preferred program. The Lord Jesus Christ “gave as a right to the Spirit-bearing body the powers which duly belong to a Spirit-

¹⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 46.

¹⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 193.

¹⁷ Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 49.

bearing body.”¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is not limited by the absence of a building or a certain program. Roland Allen has said, “The moment they are baptized they are the Temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost is power. They are not so incapable as we suppose.”¹⁹

Trusting the Holy Spirit

Church planting methodologies must reflect a trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. The church planter must never seek to take the role of the Holy Spirit within a church and must allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the new church. Church planting methodologies must be consistent with our belief in the role of the Holy Spirit within the church. Rolland Allen laments that

We believe that it is the Holy Spirit of Christ which inspires and guides us: we cannot believe that the same Spirit will guide and inspire them. We believe that the Holy Spirit has taught us and is teaching us true conceptions of morality, doctrine, ritual: we cannot believe that the same Spirit will teach them.²⁰

Church planting methodologies should reflect the belief that the Holy Spirit that indwells and empowers the mother church or more established churches is the same Holy Spirit that indwells and empowers the new church being planted.

If a trust in the Holy Spirit’s ability to lead and guide a new church is lost, then there will develop an unhealthy dependency upon the church planter or mother church. Instead of the new church depending upon the Holy Spirit, it will depend upon the church planter(s). Also, dependence upon the church planter will inhibit his or her ability to plant other church since there is a limited amount of time and resources and it will inhibit the new churches ability to reproduce since it has not learned to rely upon the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 149.

¹⁹Ibid., 146.

²⁰Ibid., 143-4.

By trusting the Holy Spirit church planters are setting an example for the new believers in the churches they plant. When we trust the Holy Spirit “we shall teach our converts to believe in Him, and when they believe in Him they will be able to face all difficulties and dangers.”²¹ Any church planting methodology that teaches new believers bad spiritual habits should be eliminated and replaced by a more biblically faithful approach.

Conclusion

Church planting is a work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads believers to proclaim the gospel and brings sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The Spirit incorporates believers into the body of Christ and forms new local churches. The Holy Spirit guides churches to send out church planters and raises up leaders for new churches. The Holy Spirit equips the members of new churches with spiritual gifts and brings unity to their fellowship.

The role of the Holy Spirit in church planting has practical implications for church planting methodologies. The Holy Spirit leads believers to proclaim the gospel; therefore, every church planting methodology must make personal evangelism a top priority. Churches should give members an opportunity to respond to the church planting call of the Holy Spirit through some kind of invitation to respond. Church planting methodologies should allow the leaders whom the Holy Spirit has made overseers to lead the new churches that are planted. Every aspect of the church planting process should be bathed in prayer as the church planting team and the new believers acknowledge the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the success of the new church. Church planting methodologies must reflect the ability of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide a new church in the absence of buildings and programs. Most importantly, however, an understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in church planting allows church planters to trust in

²¹Ibid., 150.

and rely upon the working of the Holy Spirit. Tom Steffen has pointed out, “The Holy Spirit is always at work. The Holy Spirit was there prior to the arrival of the church planters, he is there during their stay, and he will remain after their departure.”²² All church planting should reflect the reality of the Holy Spirit’s leadership and guidance over the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

²²Tom Steffen, “Flawed evangelism and church planting.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, (34, 1998), 434.

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