Ecclesiology: The Most Critical Issue in Church Planting Today
By J. D. Payne

"I believe a perverted and tarnished view of what a church is constitutes one of the greatest hurdles faced by church planters."

-- Charles Brock[1]

"Church planting that fails to engage in theological reflection on the many aspects of the mission in which the church is invited by God to participate may serve only to multiply the number of churches which are ill-prepared for the challenges of the next century."

-- Stuart Murray[2]

A couple of years ago, I conducted an informal study of 190 church planters representing thirteen different churches, denominations, and parachurch organizations asking them a single question: "What do you believe are the five most critical issues in North American church planting today." After receiving responses from forty states and four provinces, the most critical issues listed in order of popularity were 1) Lack of money; 2) Lack of leaders; 3) Lack of involvement from established churches; 4) Difficulty in contextualizing the gospel; and 5) Stress on the family. Though the responses were fascinating and have been very helpful in equipping and training church planters, I must admit that for the most part these felt needs stem from a much deeper theological issue regarding the nature and function of the local church. In an article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* Tom Julien observed "Our problem is that we identify the local church by her cultural and historic expression, more than by her biblical

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

[2]Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1998), 61.

essence."[3] After reading through hundreds of detailed responses and working with church planters for the past several years, I agree with Julien and am convinced that in North America *the most critical issue in church planting today is an ecclesiological issue.*

How a church planting team answers the question, "What is the church?" will affect everything in their ministry.[4] Apart from the obvious impact on their doctrine, their answers will shape their methods, influence their strategies, and mold their approaches to leadership development.

A casual survey of contemporary North American church planting circles in general, reveals two problematic ecclesiologies influencing church planters. This article will describe the common unhealthy paternalistic and pragmatic ecclesiologies and will conclude by advocating the need for a biblical ecclesiology, listing some of the elements included in such an alternative.

Paternalistic Ecclesiology

Paternalism is the ideology that supports the belief of one group dominating another group. One party seeks to maintain control over the other party. Paternalism establishes a superiority-inferiority dichotomy between the groups involved. By definition it creates a dependency of the inferior group for the superior group. For paternalism to exist, the dominant group is seen as the source of vitality, sustenance, and provision. Rather than the two groups existing in an interdependent relationship to accomplish a greater good, an unhealthy co-dependent relationship exists whereby the

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[3]Tom Julien, "The Essence of the Church," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly,* 34 (April 1998), 148.

[4]In this article, I will refer to the local church with a lower case "c" and the universal Church with an upper case "C".

domineering group feels empowered and self-sacrificial because they are "emptying" themselves on behalf of the inferior group. On the other hand, the inferior group feels wanted and is grateful for the other group's sacrificial giving. Rather than the relationship beginning like a parent-child relationship with the plans to quickly assist the child in becoming an adult, paternalism creates and maintains an indefinite parent-child dynamic.

Paternalism was a common practice in missionary work in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, primarily outside of North America. As missionaries would leave from European and North American nations and travel to Eastern lands to preach the gospel and plant churches, many missionaries quickly found themselves in situations where a clash of cultures existed. Soon after arriving in Chinese Provinces or African bush country, many missionaries having very little training in cross-cultural ministry naturally defaulted into the paradigms for evangelism, discipleship training, liturgies, education, and church structure and organization that they were so accustomed to "back home."

At this point in history, Western ethnocentrism ran high. Westerners rarely valued Non-western cultures and the Euro-American approach to life was seen as paramount. Colonialism was of great importance politically and the Church had embraced it as an approach to missionary work. "After all," many reasoned, "We have the gospel and our societies are not as bad as the heathen societies in the East. They need the gospel and they need to be educated so their societies will be civilized like us."

With the Euro-American paradigm of ministry being a common expression with the missionaries, naturally, the methods and means of communicating the gospel and the

teachings of Christ were very Western. Rather than allowing the gospel to come to the people through methods that were contextualized to their societies and allowing the churches planted to be indigenous churches, missionaries enculturated Easterners in the Euro-American way of thought and life. Naturally, this approach hindered the propagation of the gospel whenever the unregenerate nationals soon began to believe that to become a Christian meant an individual had to give up his or her cultural identity and become a European or an American. Rather than allowing the gospel to transform the people and their cultures, many missionaries gave the people both the gospel *and* Western civilization as a part of their task toward societal transformation.

As churches were planted both the churches and their leaders were taught Euro-American definitions of the local church. It was common for organization and structures, liturgies and music, teaching and preaching methods, and leadership development and theological education to look very much like those found in Western nations.

Once such culturally specific paradigms were in place, it was difficult for national believers to operate and facilitate such approaches to the Christian life. Not having been trained in the Western philosophies behind such models and the managerial skills necessary to maintain such practices, the missionaries quickly realized that these national believers were also ignorant and incapable of "doing" church the Western way. The result was that paternalism was necessary in order to maintain such churches in the "proper" way. A paternalistic ecclesiology as applied to a church planting context consists of three components: 1) What are our preferences to doing church the "right"

way?; 2) What is a model of church to support our understanding of the "right" way?; and 3) What is the biblical support for our determined model of church?[5]

The development of a paternalistic ecclesiology usually starts with the desires of the church planters. Some feel confident that they know what is "best" for a church, "After all," they speculate, "We have been believers for several years. We know the problems that many churches face; therefore, we are going to plant churches as we prefer and obviously without those problems." This rationale, however, assumes too much. The church planters are confident that they know what is the church based on the fact that they have had much experience being a part of churches. Second, though not to denigrate or negate experiences and wisdom gained through the years, some church planters fail to remember that there will never be a perfect church this side of heaven.[6] It should be remembered that if the Apostle Paul planted churches with problems (e.g., the Church at Corinth), contemporary church planters must realize that even their best efforts will not avoid all problems. Third, and most obvious, is the fact that any theological method that begins with one's culture, rather than the Bible, is a poor approach to understanding the church.

After beginning with the culture of the church planters, church planters following a paternalistic ecclesiology, usually decide upon a particular paradigm or model of church life to support their cultural preference. Rather than allowing the expression of

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[5]Please understand that as I describe the components of both paternalistic and pragmatic ecclesiologies that I am in no way saying that these components always happen in a sequential order, as if one component has to follow a previous component in the minds of church planters. I have used a tripartite delineation addressing both of these ecclesiologies mainly for the sake of discussion in this article.

[6]It should be remembered that though the Apostle Paul referred to the Corinthians as "babes in Christ" (1 Cor 3:1-2, HCSB), clearly it was not his desire for them to exist in such a state. His expectations for maturity were high, even in light of the fact that he had only remained with the Corinthians for eighteen months (Acts 18:11).

the newly planted church to develop from the context, the paternalistic ecclesiology imposes a favorite expression of church organization and structure onto the people. For example, if the church planters believe that age-graded Sunday School classes are the best approach because such divisions worked well in their home church, then they will attempt to use such a paradigm with little regard for the fact that the people may be very resistant to adults and children being separated for Bible study.

The Scriptures are usually used in this ecclesiological paradigm, but usually after the preference and model of church are already determined. Rather than healthy exegesis guiding the understanding of the local church, eisegesis and poor hermeneutics are likely to be used. With the paternalistic ecclesiology, there is a strong possibility that church planters "see" what they already want to find in the Scriptures regarding the local church.

Pragmatic Ecclesiology

All Kingdom citizens should be pragmatic to some degree. We do want to know what is working and what is not working to reach people with the gospel and see the multiplication of churches across the globe. If we spend much of the Lord's resources attempting to reach a certain population segment with the gospel and there is no response, then wise stewards will ask themselves, "Why?" and reconsider their evangelistic methods in light of the difficult soil. A sanctified pragmatism can be a good thing.

Pragmatism, however, can be unhealthy if taken too far. In one sense of the word, pragmatism is the doctrine which advocates, "use whatever means necessary to accomplish your task at hand" or worse, the spiritualized version of pragmatism advocates, "If the means used to accomplish your tasks are working, then obviously

God's blessing is upon you and He is pleased." It is easy to see how pragmatism can be taken too far and devolve into a philosophy void of biblical parameters.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed a pragmatic ecclesiology influencing church planters today. Thankfully, I have not encountered it in the purest sense as discussed in this article; nevertheless I have witnessed many of the various elements as described. A pragmatic ecclesiology as applied to a church planting context consists of three components: 1) What is working to plant churches?; 2) What is the cultural context of the people group?; and 3) What is the biblical support for our methods?

This contemporary ecclesiology begins by asking the question: "What works to plant churches?" Usually, the concept of "what" is understood as a particular method or model of church. Here the church planter begins by examining the globe for a system that has proven itself effective in planting churches. A pragmatic ecclesiology is usually being used whenever one hears church planters say, "Well, we're going to plant a postmodern (or cell, house, seeker, purpose-driven, Reformed, contemporary, etc.) church, because pastor _____ has seen it work well in his area."

After locating a particular method or model, the church planters usually attempt to make the paradigm fit in the cultural context of the people to whom they are called to minister. In many cases, this approach does work to reach people with the gospel and plant churches. Remember, it is a highly pragmatic approach. Murray warned against this approach when he wrote, "Church cloning, by replicating existing patterns, may be successful in the short term, but this runs the risk of consigning both planting church and church planting to longer term irrelevance."[7] Wise church planters understand that a biblical ecclesiology does not allow for the satisfaction of the planting of *a* church, but

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[7]Murray, 136.

rather the transformation of a society, as people become followers of Jesus. Fulfilling the Great Commission is a marathon and not a sprint.

An attempt to find biblical support is made for why the church planting team (and ultimately the new congregation) does what it does. Though some legitimate support will be found, the temptation for proof-texting is strong.

A problem with this theological method of locating biblical support is not with the fact that the church planters want biblical evidence for their work. Rather, the problem is that the biblical support for which many desire is support for the methods or models as used by other "successful" church planters. These methods or models may have legitimate biblical support, but for church planters subscribing to a pragmatic ecclesiology, they have not wrestled with and owned the Scriptures. Rather, they have spent more time grappling with how to make the paradigm of church "work" to produce the desired results in their contexts.

Biblical Ecclesiology

In all of the Scriptures, there is not a single mandate to go into the world and plant churches; yet, clearly there is a biblical pattern set forth in the Scriptures for church planting. The Matthean Great Commission is to go throughout the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19), or followers of Jesus. Though there is no command to plant churches, clearly what follows in the pericope, and throughout the rest of the New Testament, is that the "baptizing" and "teaching them to observe" is to take place within the context of the local expression of the Body of Christ, the church. Biblical church planting is *evangelism* that results in churches. It is a means of seeing people come to faith, being baptized, and being taught. It is a means of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Just as the Bible does not offer us a concise definition of church planting, it also does not offer us a concise statement defining the church. This lack of a clearly delineated statement is no limitation on behalf of God's revelation. Rather, what we have is over one hundred references to the *Church, church,* or *churches,* numerous descriptions of church life and ministry, scores of principles describing life in the Body, and various metaphors painting a picture of the nature and function of the church. In light of all of this Scriptural information, church planters can discover a healthy biblical understanding of the nature and function of the church.[8]

A biblical ecclesiology as applied to the realm of church planting, begins with the Scriptures. What does the Bible say in response to the question, "What is the Church?" Entire books have been written on this topic and I am confident that there is no way for me to articulate a well-defined biblical ecclesiology in this brief article. Despite this limitation, I will describe a theological method for developing a biblical ecclesiology mentioning the importance of understanding the Kingdom and biblical metaphors for the Church as related to church planting.

We enter into the Kingdom as Its citizens upon our confessions (Matt 16:15-16) and immediately receive a great responsibility as Kingdom citizens (Matt 16:18-19). Along with such a calling comes a Kingdom ethic that surpasses anything of this world (Matt 5-7). This ethic quickly redefines how we are to live in response to God (Matt 22:37-38), other Kingdom citizens (Matt 18:15-20; 22:39), and those outside the Kingdom (Matt 22:39; 28:18-20). The environment in which the Kingdom citizens are to

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[8]The issue of a healthy ecclesiology has been a concern for both the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board, with both of these Southern Baptist Convention agencies recently and clearly delineating their ecclesiological guidelines for missionaries.

live out this new ethic is within the community/fellowship (i.e., local church) of other

Kingdom citizens.

In addition to the Matthean references just listed, the Bible lists many metaphors

and actions of the Apostolic Church to describe the Church with words and concepts such

as branches (John 15), kingdom of priests (1 Pet 2), temple (1 Cor 3:16), sheep (John 10),

bride (Eph 5), salt (Matt 5:13), light (Matt 5:14), body (1 Cor 12), fellowship (1 John

1:7), and a community (Acts 2:44; 4:34). Taken within their contexts these concepts

assist us in understanding the nature and functions of the local expression of the Body of

Christ. Justice Anderson was correct when he wrote, "The nature of a local church can

only be understood in the light of the New Testament doctrine of the spiritual [universal]

Church."[9]

Following a healthy understanding of the doctrine of the Church, church planters

then must decide how to preach the gospel (i.e., "make disciples") and what it means to

be a Kingdom citizen (i.e., "teach them to observe"), to the people in their unique

contexts. Wise is the church planter who studies the culture of the people in order to

communicate effectively the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27). It is after a healthy

understanding of the Church/church and the culture of one's ministry context, that the

church planting team should begin to look at what is working to reach people with the

gospel and plant churches.

Church planters should study the methods and models used by others, but

methods and models are culturally specific and are not universally translatable.

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[9]Justice C. Anderson, "The Nature of Churches," in *The Birth of Churches: A Biblical Basis for Church Planting,* Talmadge R. Amberson, Compiler., (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979), 56.

"Effective" methods and models need to be examined by church planters and sifted for their golden nuggets of truth that can then be applied to their own ministry contexts.

It is through much prayer and trial and error that church planters will begin to see an expression of church take shape that is culturally specific to the people to whom they are called to serve. When the church planting team begins with a healthy understanding of the Scriptures, they will do a much better job at laying a foundation for healthy discipleship and numerical growth in the days ahead.

Implications on Church Planting

Though the implications of a healthy ecclesiology on church planting activities are numerous, I will limit my discussion to three particular areas of influence: methods, strategy, and leadership development. Each of these significant areas demands a biblical understanding of the church as a prerequisite for healthy ministry. Without the proper foundation, church planters run the risk of greatly hindering Kingdom work.

Strategy

Church planting teams must always begin their ministries with the end in mind. If church planters understand the church as existing for herself, then it is very easy for the church planting team to become content with the planting of a single church that will "reach everyone in this city." Though this goal is a noble one, due to at least cultural differences and population density I know of no churches who are able to reach such a wide demographic and quantity of the people in a given area. Even in small rural regions where the likelihood of achieving such a goal may be more readily accomplished, clearly the pattern witnessed in the New Testament is one whereby the church planting team was

involved in planting churches in various cities and instilling within those churches the

D.N.A. necessary to continue to carry the gospel beyond themselves (e.g., 1 Thess 1:8).[10]

Church planters who enter a context with the intention to plant one church have a

myopic understanding of the Great Commission. A healthy ecclesiology causes church

planters to realize that the church is to grow and multiply herself throughout a population

segment or people group. Rather that strategizing for the planting of a single church,

healthy church planting strategies include a wide-spread dissemination of the gospel with

the intention of seeing numerous churches planted as a result of such preaching. A

reproduction-orientation must be in the heart of the church planters.

The Apostle Paul clearly desired the gospel to spread across the world. Writing to

the Thessalonians he revealed, "Finally, pray for us, brothers, that the Lord's message

may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you (2 Thess 3:1, HCSB). It is

also likely that the Apostle believed that the gospel would continue to spread across the

known world when he mentioned that his plans were to travel to Spain, believing that his

work was completed in certain provinces (Romans 15:19-24).

Church planting strategies must embrace a philosophy of reproduction. If the

church is truly a living body of believers that loves God, each other, and the world, then

healthy strategies will emerge from a biblical ecclesiology that will not allow church

planters to rest in the desire to plant a single church and maybe later, plant other

churches. Everything church planters do should be with the mentality of seeing the

gospel spread rapidly and healthy churches multiplied across their regions or population

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[10]It is worth noting that 2000 years later we are followers of Christ because of the faithfulness of church planters who were imparted with such a spiritual-genetic makeup.

segments. Strategies that embrace a philosophy of reproduction will result in disciples and churches who are reproduction-oriented in their ecclesiologies.

Methods

How church planters understand the nature of the church will affect their church planting methods. For example, imagine that there are two artists in one room with each receiving the assignment to paint a picture of a building. Before brushes are put to canvases, both artists already have a picture in mind of the desired outcome. Sometime later when the artists reveal their masterpieces one has painted a skyscraper and the other a small store. Given their assignments, both artists accomplished the tasks correctly, yet the end products were radically different.

The image of "church" which church planters have in mind long before they enter the field will shape the outcome. This image will determine the church planting methods used in the work. If the understanding of a church is a small group of people with a multitude of programs, then the methods used will work to produce this result. If the understanding of church is a large group of people, with a magnificent sanctuary, a great praise team, and a nice sound system, again, the methods used will be those which work to produce this understanding of church.

There are multitudes of ways (i.e., methods) to plant churches, though not all are conducive to the healthy multiplication of churches throughout a population segment or people group. A biblical ecclesiology reminds church planters that their methods need to be contextualized and highly reproducible by the people to whom they are called to minister. Rather than the church planters holding the keys to church planting through highly structured, highly subsidized, and highly technical church planting methods, a

healthy understanding of the church leads to church planting methods that are easily embraced and adopted by the people themselves. Biblical church planting is a very simple ministry; it is evangelism that results in congregations. Church planters must make certain that their methods are ones that the people they reach are able to then apply as they are sent to plant other churches. Church planters must remember that they are not the key to reaching a people group, but rather the people themselves are the key. The people will be able to reach their kith and kin more efficiently and effectively than the church planters, assuming they have been taught highly reproducible methods of evangelism and church planting.

Leadership Development

One final area of importance is that of the close connection between leadership development and ecclesiology. How church planters understand the doctrine of the church will affect how they understand who is capable of being an elder, deacon, teacher, etc. Much caution should be taken into consideration regarding the importing of Western expectations on to the new believers. For example, an examination of many of the biblical requirements for elders and deacons (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9) place a great deal of expectation on the man's character, family dynamics, and reputation, rather than his business accomplishments, number of degrees, and managerial skills. Though one is clearly to be able to teach and exhort from the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:9), it is dangerous for church planters to allow these two characteristics to negate the others. Both the public and the private life are extremely important and cannot be separated.

Again, if the requirements for the birth of churches include technical structures and organizations that only highly skilled and highly trained people can implement and

maintain, then church planters will significantly limit the number of people who can plant

churches. Charles Brock was correct when he warned against church planters becoming

"scaffolding builders":

> Organizational structure can be used and is needed by a church, but the organism should only develop organizational structures when, and as long as, they enhance the well being of the organism. In the beginning of church planting, the attention must be on the birth of the organism. Out of felt and real needs, the necessary programs and organizations can be added. The foundation is laid first, then the superstructure is built. We must beware of losing focus and becoming professional scaffolding builders. It is one thing to plant a church where the family of believers (the organism) becomes one, inhabited by the Spirit; it is something quite different if the church planter seeks to develop the programs and organizations first. It is like the builder who tries to develop the top story of the building at the same time he is developing the foundation. Few can do this, and anyone who tries faces insurmountable odds to effectively planting an indigenous church.[11]

Another important consideration regarding leadership development is the

importance of modeling and on-the-job-training. Many church planters have been

educated in the classroom, mainly removed from the realities of the world. They imitate

what has been modeled before them, and therefore, attempt to develop leaders in new

churches *solely* through a classroom model. Though this common Western approach to

education is good, it can be problematic in missionary work where everything is not

always safe and cut-and-dried. Paul reminded his readers to "imitate" him, obviously

having set a reproducible example for the people to follow in belief and practice (1 Cor

4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7, 9).

Much of Jesus' teaching was *both* seen and heard as He and his disciples

experienced life together. For example, prior to sending out the Seventy (Luke 10), He

had already modeled for them preaching, healing, and casting out demons (Luke 1-9),

now he was sending them out to do likewise. When they returned rejoicing over the

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[11]Brock, 59.

authority over the demons (Luke 10:17), Jesus used this moment to teach them a greater truth (Luke 10:20).

Wise church planters understand that the biblical prerequisites for church leaders are to be staunchly adhered to and do not change with shifting cultural values. Also, rather than importing technical organizations and structures onto the new believers, church planters are wise to allow the leaders to come from the harvest fields and be raised up in a church culture that is appropriate to the newly planted church.[12] Healthy leadership development includes that the church planters *at least* model a reproducible life-style and provide on-the-job-training for the leaders they are equipping to serve the church.

Conclusion

Church planters must take time to search the Scriptures to answer the question, "What is the church?" Since the Scriptures do not bow to the gods of this age, for some church planters this process will be painful, requiring them to surrender their visions, dreams, passions, desires, finances, and prestige that have developed over the years from Western cultural definitions and expectations for what constitutes a "healthy" church. Hope is found in the God of the ages Who has clearly described and explained His desire for His Church, both universal and local. Church planters must embrace a biblical ecclesiology rather than succumbing to a paternalistic or pragmatic ecclesiology that is commonplace today.

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[12]It should be remembered that the elders for many of the new churches in the New Testament came from the new believers. For example, in Acts 14:23 the Apostle Paul his team appointed elders in the newly planted churches. Also, Titus was left on Crete to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5.

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