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A Time to Plant

CONTRIBUTORS:

Dr Tom Ascol is Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL and author of the Founders Ministries Blog: wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/

Dr Phil Newton is Pastor of South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis TN.

Dr Stan Reeves is Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Auburn University and serves as the webmaster for Founders Ministries. Stan also serves as an elder at Grace Heritage Church in Auburn, AL.

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The Founders Journal



Editor: Thomas K. Ascol

Associate Editor: Tom J. Nettles

Design Editor: Kenneth A. Puls

Contributing Editors: Bill Ascol, Timothy George, Fred Malone, Joe Nesom, Phil Newton, Roger Nicole, Don Whitney, Hal Wynn

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A Time to Plant

Tom Ascol

In the early church evangelism and church planting went hand-in-hand. There really was no other alternative because where the gospel penetrated and people were converted, if they were to be gathered into a church then such a body had to be established. New believers in Ephesus could not be assimilated into one of several churches in the city. They had to become part of a new church.

It is an unavoidable conclusion from Acts that where evangelism resulted in people becoming followers of Jesus there also were new churches planted. Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey demonstrates this clearly. On their return to their home church in Antioch they revisited the new converts that had been won to Christ in the cities of Galatia and Phrygia. Luke tells us that they were "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith" and "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:22-23).

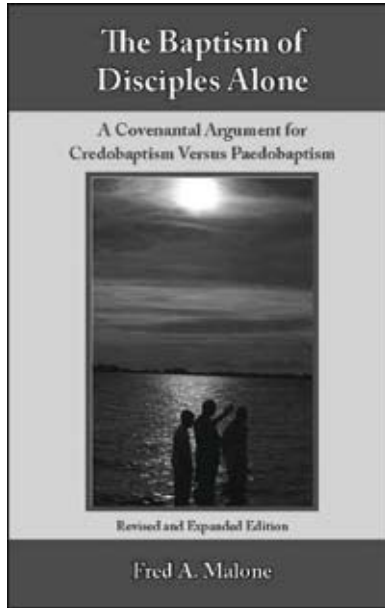
Evangelism resulted in new disciples who joined together in local churches. That is how churches were planted in the first century. Today, if we are honest, we must admit that many of our new churches come from sin rather than evangelism. If all the churches that began as a split from another congregation were to go out of existence today, the number of evangelical churches in America would be greatly diminished.

That is not to say that it is never right for believers to leave a church to start another one. Sometimes that option is the only viable one available. In a day when many churches have lost the gospel it is not unusual for there to be some kind of disruption in congregations where the effort is made to recover it. The work of church renewal and reformation is very important and greatly needed and the consequences that go with that effort are sometimes initially very painful.

But commitment to church reformation must never become an excuse for neglecting church planting. By the grace of God more and more pastors and churches are thinking about and taking steps to become actively involved in the work of starting new churches. The theme of the 2008 National Founders Conference is both church reformation and church planting. Every church needs to cultivate an ongoing commitment to both.

This issue of the journal gives full attention to the work of church planting. Pray that the Lord will stir even greater passion among us for the extension of His kingdom by sending out more workers into His harvest fields for the purpose of seeing people converted and new churches started. 🌱

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A Perspective on Church Planting

Phil A. Newton

Twenty-two years ago, when I first began to make plans to move from my Alabama pastorate to plant a church in Memphis, I remember the puzzled look that I received from a minister friend. “You want to plant a church in Memphis?” he asked quizzically. “Why, they have more churches than gas stations in Memphis!”

I’m not sure about his church/gas station statistics but he was right that Memphis has a lot of churches. Southern Baptists alone, during that time in the late 1980s had 125 churches. But his theory met with stunned silence when I pointed out that the number of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches in Memphis had remained virtually unchanged while the population quadrupled.

Memphis does not stand alone in this category. While, thankfully, the number of SBC churches has risen by more than twenty since I moved to the city, that still only scratches the surface of the need in our community alone. During the period that I was planting South Woods, I concurrently worked on my doctor of ministry degree, concentrating on church planting in the “Deep South.” I concluded that with the projected population growth in the next 20 years, at least 29,000 new churches would need to be started in the deep southern states just to keep up with population growth; and that did not consider the existing population and existing communities that lacked adequate gospel-centered churches. Just imagine the multiplied population centers on the east coast, northeast, Midwest, west coast, and Sun Belt regions! The 29,000 new churches would be the proverbial drop in the bucket!

But let me offer a necessary qualification. The goal of church planting must never be to just start a church, especially if one considers a church only as a religious gathering of those who offer some profession of Christian faith. We have far too many of those kinds of religious gatherings! By church, we insist upon congregations of regenerate people, gathered in covenant with one another for the regular exposition of God’s Word, the exercising of discipline, the observance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, intentionally gospel-focused ministry (including missions), and the ordering of the church according to the revelation of Scripture (that is, the church government is not left to chance but regulated by Scripture). I think that may narrow some of what takes place in the name of church planting!

If we enlarge our look at church planting to encompass the globe, we are staggered by population growth and the ethno-linguistic people groups without local churches. Millions of new churches are needed to meet this pressing gospel need around the world.

That's a bit bigger bite than we can swallow in this essay or even in our local church's priorities. So let's focus our attention on church planting in our own local communities. Is it realistic for your church to think about involvement in church planting? Often, we relegate church planting to denominational mission boards; but that consigns the church's responsibility to an agency instead of to the living organism of the local church. While denominational mission agencies can help facilitate church planting by providing demographic studies, materials, leadership training, and consultation, ultimately, churches plant churches. We cannot be satisfied with sending a few dollars to the denomination so that *they* plant churches; no, it's our responsibility. We may not be able to single-handedly plant a church but we can unite with like-minded churches in establishing new, gospel-centered churches.

Let's probe this idea of churches planting churches with a view toward involving all of our churches.

Why Church Planting?

Obviously, we cannot just begin a church-planting campaign because there are not enough churches. We're not a food franchise or department store trying to expand its brand of products into a region. We're the church of the Lord Jesus Christ; we've been purchased at the price of Christ's blood; we've been established by the Lord of the church as missionary outposts to proclaim the gospel; we've been strategically placed as salt and light in the world; and one day we will gather corporately before the throne of God and the Lamb to eternally exult in His grace. So what we're doing is dissimilar to the world of marketing. When the church succumbs to marketing philosophy it forfeits its gospel-dependence for man-centered techniques. Instead, we must be convinced that church planting is biblical and therefore necessary and blessed by God.

Biblical and Theological Concerns

My strong conviction through reading the Scriptures is that you cannot have a proper theology or methodology of evangelism without the church. By this, I do not mean that people can only be saved within the confines of a church structure. But I do mean that our evangelism must be in relationship to the church. Leon Morris wrote, "Salvation is social. It concerns the whole people of God." He goes on to explain the continuity of believers in Old and New Testaments. Much more, we have continuity with those presently living so that we are saved *in relationship to the church*.¹

Church planting is not a new phenomenon; it originated as the gospel moved out of Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and the remotest parts of the earth. The book of Acts champions church planting! While some suggest it unwise to build

a theology based on the book of Acts, when it comes to church planting, most of the biblical evidence for church planting is found in the book of Acts. Though not in epistolary form, the narratives of Acts take us from one church planting occurrence to another—without detailed explanation—as Christians evangelized their world. They knew nothing of the spread of evangelism without church planting. Even the commission that Christ gave to the church setting forth the missionary mandate cannot be fulfilled apart from church planting (i.e., if no churches exist among the people evangelized). Matthew 28:19–20 calls for disciple-making, baptizing and ongoing teaching of believers so that they learn faithful obedience to the Lord of the Church. Para-church groups are not equipped for that work nor called to it. That work belongs to the church, so the church must include church planting in its missionary and evangelistic plans.

Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary to China and Africa in the early 20th century, correctly summed up the theological mandate for church planting expressed in the book of Acts.

It is impossible but that the account so carefully given by St Luke of the planting of the churches in the Four Provinces should have something more than a mere archaeological and historical interest. Like the rest of the Holy Scriptures it was ‘written for our learning’. It was certainly meant to be something more than the romantic history of an exceptional man, doing exceptional things under exceptional circumstances—a story from which ordinary people of a later age can get no more instruction for practical missionary work than they receive from the history of the Cid, or from the exploits of King Arthur. It was really intended to throw light on the path of those who should come after.²

With that in mind, let’s do a quick survey of the book of Acts and the church planting implications and evidences found in it. Acts 1:8 reiterates the same Great Commission earlier cited. Christ does not appoint the church to get decisions but to make disciples under the power of the Holy Spirit. That work cannot take place without local congregations assuming the role of disciple-making, ongoing training, and the accountability and corrective discipline of new believers. Acts 2:37–47, shows the beginning of the first church in Jerusalem, with all of the elements that Jesus called for in the Great Commission. They made disciples after clear gospel preaching by Peter and the Apostles. They baptized new believers (v. 41) and continued, with systematic teaching (v. 42) as well as regular evangelistic expansion (v. 47). Persecution arose after Stephen’s death, with the church in Jerusalem “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (8:1). “Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word,” including Philip, who preached the gospel in Samaria and established the first church among the Samaritans (8:4–24).³

Though we often wish for more commentary, the biblical writers give us just what we need. After Saul’s conversion, Luke commented, “So *the church throughout*

all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, *it continued to increase*" (9:31, italics mine). In that remarkable statement, Luke compresses the first surge of church planting in the early church into one verse! The church, viewed singularly as the body of Christ, continued to increase corporately as local congregations were established beyond Jerusalem into Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

Acts 10 shows the church beginning in Caesarea with Cornelius' conversion and a church established among new Gentile believers. Peter ordered the baptism of those evidencing regenerate life (10:48). Acts 11:19–26 tells the story of how the gospel came to Antioch. News of this gospel movement reached the church in Jerusalem's ears, so they sent Barnabas to give leadership. He, in turn, sought out Saul of Tarsus as his assistant. Together "for an entire year they *met with the church* and taught considerable numbers" (10:26, italics mine). What's remarkable is that Luke has no need to stop and explain the great expansion of new churches. He just states the obvious.

The one early church that became a "mother church" to more than any in the Gentile world was the church in Antioch. As the sending church, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel into the Galatian region. We find that they planted churches in Pisidian Antioch (13:44–49), Derbe, Lystra and Iconium (14:20–21). They did not leave the churches without leadership and structure. "When they had appointed elders for them *in every church*, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (14:23, italics mine). These early church missionaries considered church leadership structure an essential mark of Christian congregations.

The letter sent to the new churches by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem in order to correct the problem sown by Judaizers, went "to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles" (15:23). That evidenced churches planted in the Syrian and Cilician regions with Antioch being the capital.⁴ Paul and Silas also took the letter to the established churches in the Galatian region "for them to observe" (16:4). The continued movement of the gospel beyond Galatia (modern Turkey) into Europe took place with the vision calling for Paul to come to Macedonia to help them (16:9). Consequently, the first church in Europe was established in Philippi (16:11–40). From Philippi, churches began in Thessalonica and Berea (16:1–15), Corinth and Ephesus (18:1–11; 19:1–10). Indications of churches in Troas (20:7–12), Tyre (21:3–5), Ptolemais (21:7) and Caesarea (21:8–14) demonstrate that where the gospel traversed in power, churches were planted. When Paul came to Rome (28:15–16), he met with "the brethren," shorthand for *the church* that had already been established in the capital city.

The Epistles bear evidence of churches in the Galatian region, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), Thessalonica, Crete (Titus 1:5) and a scattering of congregations addressed by James and Peter, including those in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). John identifies seven specific churches in Asia Minor in Revela-

tion 1:11, including Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia. Our Lord addresses specific issues of doctrine, discipline, persecution, purity and other matters pertinent to each of the Seven Churches that had been earlier planted, whether by Paul or other early evangelists (Revelation 2–3). Wherever the disciples scattered with the gospel, they sought to establish new churches.

This survey of church planting in Acts with additional evidence in the Epistles and Revelation, indicate the pattern of gospel expansion for every age. Fortunately, since many churches have been planted throughout the world, we can link new believers with established congregations. From existing churches gospel outreach takes place. Where no congregations exist, then, we must insist, biblical evangelism has not been adequately done until churches are planted for the ongoing growth, nurturing and ministry of the new believers. To abrogate planting churches, while engaging aggressively in evangelistic work in areas that lack gospel-centered churches, misses the point of biblical evangelism. New believers are to be folded into local flocks, and where there are none, the conscientious evangel will seek to establish new churches. His work is not completed until a viable church exists to nurture and involve the new believers in gospel ministry. Roland Allen diagnosed this problem almost a century ago.

Men have wandered over the world, ‘preaching the Word’, laying no solid foundations, establishing nothing permanent, leaving no really instructed society behind them, and have claimed St Paul’s authority for their absurdities...people have adopted fragments of St Paul’s method and have tried to incorporate them into alien systems, and the failure which resulted has been used as an argument against the Apostle’s method. For instance, people have baptized uninstructed converts and the converts have fallen away; but St Paul did not baptize uninstructed converts apart from a system of mutual responsibility which ensured their instruction. Again, they have gathered congregations and have left them to fend for themselves, with the result that the congregations have fallen back into heathenism. But St Paul did not gather congregations, *he planted churches*, and he did not leave a church until it was fully equipped with orders of ministry, sacraments and tradition [italics mine].⁵

Allowing for Allen’s Anglicanism, I think he struck the right chord in this issue. As we observe Paul’s methodology for evangelism, we find that it focused on church planting. Church planting was not a by-product of his evangelism but central to it—that’s the point that Allen makes so plainly.

I don’t want to suggest that church planting must take place in every evangelistic labor. Rather if there are no gospel-focused churches in an area, then yes, church planting must be under taken or else, if at least the shell of a church exists, the work of biblical reformation must be pursued to bring life to lethargic, theologically-anemic churches. In other words, our goal must not be to simply win converts but to make disciples—and that cannot happen without churches.

Geographic Concerns

Sometimes geography demands new churches. Communities change; people move out while others move in. Some churches adapt to the change; others don't. When they don't we must not shy away from planting a new church where older churches exist. Where churches have abandoned the biblical gospel we must not be shy about establishing new, gospel-focused churches.

Several years ago, Stan Reeves and I were rooming together during a meeting. We spent much of our spare time talking about his burden to plant a baptistic, reformed church in the college town of Auburn, Alabama. While there were a number of Baptist churches in Auburn, none were distinctively reformed in theology, worship and ministry. While there were several reformed churches, none were distinctively baptistic, holding to credo-baptism. Stan, an electrical engineering professor at Auburn, felt an increasing burden to be involved in planting a reformed Baptist church that would have a strong outreach to the college and surrounding community. Another family joined him in this burden, putting their resources and energies into the process of establishing a new church. After a couple of years, Paul Stith moved his family to Auburn to begin serving as pastor of the new church. Stan and Paul met with Baptist and Presbyterian church pastors to let them know specifics of their plans and to enlist their prayer support. They met with receptiveness and encouragement from these pastors. Grace Heritage Church resulted and continues serving Christ in Auburn.

Memphis has a population of nearly one million with hundreds of churches. Not all of the churches faithfully proclaim the gospel or regularly expound the Scriptures or discipline their membership or make right use of the ordinances or practice biblical church government or maintain a gospel-focused ministry. It's not the number of churches in Memphis that one has to consider when looking to plant a church in this southern city. Instead, it has more to do with the gospel-impact the existing churches are making. If they are not penetrating the darkness then, either new churches need to be planted, or the existing churches need reformation. Both are important and necessary works. Both require prayer-soaked strategies. Both require leadership with particular strengths: one with the patience and nurturing skills to plant a new work, the other with the patience and diplomatic skills to build layers of biblical reformation.

Demographic shift in downtown Memphis left the city with very little gospel witness in that area. So, a couple of years ago, Jordan Thomas, a young man brought up just across the river from Memphis, returned to plant a church in the inner city. Jordan previously served on a church staff in the area and faced the anti-Calvinistic fervor of his church leadership. Confronted with the harsh reality of a church that did not appreciate his biblical ministry or the doctrines of grace, Jordan saw God's providence in this as an opportunity for additional training at the Bethlehem Institute in Minneapolis. After receiving training under John Piper and the staff at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Jordan returned to Memphis,

united with two friends and began Grace Church. Located near the river front, Jordan's church focuses its ministry on the people that live in his area: down-and-outers, government apartment dwellers, as well as those living in upscale apartments and houses along the Mississippi River. Meeting weekly in rented space, Grace Church seeks to serve Christ and His gospel with a distinctively reformed, baptistic witness in downtown Memphis.

In a given community where there are plenty of church buildings with dying congregations limping through the motions of Christian worship but no viable gospel ministry, no passion for the lost, no missionary spirit, and no one willing to engage the culture with the gospel, then it's time to plant a church! The goal, however, is not to trample on the existing churches. Perhaps in God's mercy, existing but lethargic churches will be reinvigorated by a new church planted in their area. The new church will focus on reaching the unchurched that the existing churches are not reaching; and the new church will become a refuge for gospel-starved believers that struggle through their membership in gospel-weak churches.

Doxological Considerations

Accompanying biblical, theological and geographical reasons for new churches is the desire to see Christ magnified and honored through churches that are unashamedly gospel-driven. Not given to the latest fads or gimmicks to attract uninterested people, gospel-focused new churches seek to display in their relationships, worship, preaching and ministry the centrality of Christ's glory in the church. Unfortunately, many existing churches are depressingly void of Christ's glory. They have organization, programs, liturgy and money but the savor of Christ and His gospel is noticeably absent. They may draw numbers and claim converts but lack the distinctively biblical marks of a church. In such a setting, it's time to plant a new church for the sake of Christ's glory in a community.

The New Testament offers many images to describe the church: the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), God's household (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15), dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22), the pillar and support of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15) and the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 19:7–9). That last picture of the church as the bride of Christ reminds us of the constant goal that must motivate our church organization and ministry. Rather than being shaped by the marketing techniques of the world, the church must prepare for the eternal marriage with Christ. He gave Himself for the church to sanctify and cleanse her “by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25–27). Yet many churches lack the evidence of Christ's sanctifying work. Could it be that many are nothing more than religious organizations with Christian titles? New churches must be planted that live with the passion to do all that they do to the glory of Christ.

Why Not to Plant Churches?

Over the past twenty years, after planting the church that I presently serve, I've engaged many pastors and would-be pastors regarding church planting. One thing that concerns me in many of the conversations is the rationale for planting a church. Sometimes the reason is just not sound enough to venture into the process. Let me offer a few reasons why not to plant churches.

First, don't plant a church in order to *escape* from dealing with issues in the pastorate. Perhaps a brother faces the long, grinding work of biblical reformation. That is a daunting challenge—yet a necessary one. We might not solve our problems by planting another church. We might just take our problems with us! Others face dealing with church membership, reducing the church roll to an honest number, or exercising discipline on erring members. Those are huge issues! Who can blame anyone from running from them—unless, of course, one is called by God to shepherd His flock.

Escaping difficulties by planting a church will only ensure that difficulties of different stripes will follow. I must admit, when I moved to Memphis to plant a church after pastoring three other churches, I thought that I would leave behind many of the typical issues faced by Southern Baptist pastors: unqualified deacons, poor organization, power structures, turf wars, nasty business meetings, to name a few. I did leave some of those things behind but inherited other issues that are common to church starts, issues such as power structures (sound familiar), relationship squabbles, building problems, leadership issues, no organization at all, etc.

You cannot escape. Issues come with the territory. With people come problems. But that's why God has called you to the work—that you might point your congregation to Christ and His glory in all things; that you might serve as an example of godliness in trying times; that you might feed the flock the Word of God, nurturing and admonishing them to follow after Christ; that you might apply the gospel to every area of life and ministry.

Second, don't plant a church on *impulse*. There's been no strategy involved or increasing burden by the Spirit; just a mess that looks for a quick solution. Starting a new church seems like the way to go. Church splits have mothered many new churches! Trouble brews; a fight erupts; sides are chosen; and *presto!* A new church is formed!

Let me hasten to point out that in God's sovereign kindness, many good churches have started out of church splits. These churches have legitimate reason for their start only if every means to reconcile on the basis of truth has been exhausted. If the split occurs over disagreement on the color of the carpet or the time Sunday School begins or whether or not to give the church staff a cost of living raise, then humility and repentance must prevail over abrupt departure to start another church. However, if a split occurs over what constitutes the gospel or the essentials of the faith or biblical church leadership or maintaining regener-

ate membership or exercising biblical church discipline, then a new church *might* be necessary. I say, *might*, because these doctrinal issues can possibly be worked out with patient, humble teaching. Never rush to plant a church in a moment of impulsiveness. Seek to display the spirit of Christ in all things. Only when serious doctrinal and gospel issues cannot be resolved must a split occur for the sake of Christ's glory in the community. And in that setting, the new church must never swagger with pride that they are the *real* church. Trouble could follow the new church, too, so give care to approach starting a new work with humility.

Third, don't plant a church as a problem-solving *panacea*. Such idealism actually exalts man rather than the Lord of the church. Sinners are always messy; including the sinner that happens to be the church planter! New churches bring in their own problems. Though thinking that I would avoid many of the more nasty issues facing traditional pastorates, at South Woods I have still faced hidden agendas, strange and unorthodox beliefs, personality conflicts, leadership struggles, financial woes, and a bag full of other issues. Starting a new church doesn't eliminate problems unless you eliminate people; and that's not the goal of a new church!

Finally, don't plant a church, necessarily, just because it seems the only option to pastor. I've run across a few men that have not been able to secure a pastorate in the more traditional way, so they view church planting as the means to *secure a pulpit*. Now, this brings up an important matter: that there are more pastoral candidates than open church pulpits might be a clear indication that some of that waiting number do need to plant churches. But not all of them; some need to be *seasoned* a bit longer before launching into starting a new church. Churches do not need to be started to accommodate men but rather to glorify and exalt Christ. Some men lack the necessary gifts and calling to pastor but nonetheless, think that they must have a church. Others are coarse and inflammatory, having caused divisions by their personality foibles, so they seek to plant a church where everyone will cooperate with them and overlook their unsanctified personality. Beginning a church to suit such a man is entirely inappropriate.

When someone approaches me about planting a church, I usually quiz them concerning their motive. Why do they want to plant a church? Why start from scratch without any history or tradition, without leadership structure or educational organization, without financial backing or arrangements, without children or youth ministries, without building or suitable location? Why do it? I would boil the right motives down to two. First, you see *the need* for a new church, not to escape problems but to establish a biblical ministry to reach people for the sake of God's kingdom. The need is not so that you will have a platform but for the sake of Christ's glory among a people that His name might be honored. Second, you sense *the call* of God on your life to do this work. It may not be as strong as your call to preach but it is nonetheless very real in your life. You test it and weigh it. You evaluate your motives and you consider the demands involved; none of this deters you from planting a church. You test your sense of calling with your wife

and your spiritual mentors. They recognize God's preparation in your life and the unique abilities entrusted to you for such a work. You are willing to risk all for the sake of establishing a new church to the glory of Christ. Only then are you ready to move forward in planting a church.

You might get the idea that I want to talk brothers out of church planting. But that's not the case at all; I am concerned that my brothers understand the demand of Christ as they ponder starting a new church. They will wear different hats—preacher, pastor, organizer, educator, counselor, motivator, scheduler, group leader, custodian, nurturer, trainer, etc. They must be willing to work hard and long hours, often working another job to meet family needs. They must be willing to trust others who will join them, sharing the load, wisely distributing responsibilities, training leaders, investing in people and cultivating teachers. They must be accountable to others spiritually, financially, morally, ethically and ecclesiologically. They must be committed to the people among whom they are seeking to establish a church by being part of their lives, sharing their joys and sorrows, knowing their heartaches and trials. They must be teachable, realizing that as a church planter, there will be plenty of “firsts” that cross the threshold. They will make mistakes and must humbly admit it. They will need course-corrections from time to time as their “best laid plans” fizzle. This, in God's providence, re-directs the new church's ministry. They must be flexible in plans and organization but unbending in doctrine and commitment to gospel ministry.

Who Should Consider Church Planting?

While the theme, *churches plant churches*, directs my understanding of church planting, it is also true that church planting normally begins with one person. There have probably not been many church business meetings where several people stood up spontaneously to recommend starting a new church! Only if someone has given thought to the need will it surface in a congregational meeting. That person may be the pastor or an elder or another leader who sees the need for replicating his church's ministry in another part of the city where he serves. Or he may see the need for establishing a gospel-focused church in another community or even in another country. He carries this burden in prayer. He investigates and ponders it. Then he presents his thoughts to trusted leaders who join him in praying and seeking the Lord's direction. Out of this consciousness to establish a new church *the local church prepares to plant a church*. The local church leadership carefully considers who will lead the new church, where will it be located, how will it be financed, who will it send out from their midst as the core group, what the mother church's ongoing involvement will look like, and when to cut the apron strings to the new church.

This *mother church model* provides a network of accountability, support and stability to see the young church through. It may very well be the proving ground for the church planter where he is mentored for the work that the mother church

has called him to embrace. I think of the incredible work that Pastor Tony Mattia and Trinity Baptist Church of Wamego, Kansas have done as a mother church model. They have trained leaders, sent out members, sacrificed financially and invested enormous energy in birthing a number of churches in Kansas. With Spurgeon's dictate, "If there is no church...should you not commence one?" directing them, Trinity Baptist continues to take the lead in church planting among Southern Baptists of Kansas.

The *cooperating churches model* unites churches like-minded in doctrine and methodology in the work of planting similar churches. Some churches find that spinning off a significant portion of their membership to plant a church to be more than they can commit. So, they join others in planning for a new church, training the church planter and underwriting the initial expenses. With this model, two or three or more churches would form a steering committee to chart the course for a new church. Elders or other leaders from each church would do the leg-work necessary to lay groundwork for the new church. It may be that due to the size of each involved, bearing equal contribution of core members and expenses would be inappropriate. Instead, each contributes according to Christ's provisions. Here the humility of serving one another in the name of Christ prevails, as the steering committee plans, trains, and launches a new work with the blessing of each congregation.

Sometimes the church is started by a *church planter* burdened with an area's need for a gospel-focused church. The church planter must see his first priority as developing accountability with a sending church. That church may be in the same community or a thousand miles away, but the level of accountability must be intact and insisted upon. Our church planted a church over 5,000 miles from Memphis in Niteroi, Brazil. One of our long-time members, Kevin Millard, along with his wife and family, moved to Brazil to serve in student work. In a distinctly providential move, he became a church planter even though that was not his original intention when he moved to Brazil. He consulted our elders every step of the way. We talked preaching, doctrinal statement, ecclesiology, organization, leadership, membership, finances and location. One of the highlights of my pastoral ministry was preaching the dedication service as this new church officially began its gospel ministry in Niteroi. Our church continues to assist this church both with counsel and financial support.

But what if there are no churches interested in planting a new church nor a church planter in view, yet a community needs additional gospel-focused churches? This calls for the *like-minded believers model* for new church starts. These believers might be in different churches in the community, longing for a more distinctly biblical ministry or longing to see a particular part of the community with a gospel-focused church. Though their local churches may not be willing to initiate or invest in such a work, these believers are willing to do so. They sense an intense burden from the Lord to be part of this kind of work. So, they meet to pray, study the Word, and seek godly counsel for discharging their burden. If no local church

exists to help them, then they may need to look outside the community, hopefully with the blessing of their own church's leadership. A number of strong reformed churches have begun out of this kind of burden. Grace Heritage Church in Auburn, that I mentioned earlier, began with this model. Though no local churches sponsored them, the core group left their respective churches in good standing, and depended on churches outside the community for accountability and sponsorship. South Woods was privileged to be one of the sponsoring churches. Our role was to provide financial accountability—with our treasurer handling their finances until they were constituted as a church; counsel—which we regularly enjoyed via email and phone conversations; and some financial help.

Conclusion

Should your church have a part in planting gospel-focused churches in your community and beyond? That's an important question to consider in these days where the gospel is diminished in favor of pragmatic, man-centered work. Perhaps you've not given much thought to church planting; you may even have found this essay odd to your tastes. Consider the biblical pattern of church planting and why it is necessary for ongoing evangelistic work. Ask the Lord what part your church might play in the grand scope of expanding the reach of the gospel among all people. Step out courageously and humbly as part of the network of churches and church planters across the globe that desire to see the glory of Christ Jesus shine through His churches, driven by the gospel and contented only with the honor of Christ. 🌹

Notes:

¹ Leon Morris, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 133.

² Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 4.

³ All Scripture references from the NASB.

⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 561.

⁵ Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 5.

⁶ I recommend studying Mark Dever's excellent book that considers the biblical marks of the church: *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*—New Expanded Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004; first published edition, Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 1997).

A Layman's Guide to Church Planting

Stan Reeves

An earlier version of this article appeared as a series of posts for the Reformed Baptist Fellowship blog.¹

For 13 years my family and I were members of a Presbyterian church while maintaining Baptist convictions. Though we appreciated the sound gospel ministry of our church and the commitment to Reformed theology, we longed for a church that was more in keeping with our convictions about the nature of the church and at the same time focused on Christ-centered preaching and teaching from a Reformed perspective. We dreamed of the possibility that someone would start a Baptist church in our area with Reformed theological commitments, although we knew of no one else in our area who shared our convictions and saw no promise of such an effort. Untold numbers of others find themselves in similar or more discouraging circumstances. They long for a biblically sound church but cannot find one in their area or even the prospect for one in the near future. Lay people often feel helpless to do anything about such circumstances.

Our experience suggests that lay people can do a great deal. Over the last four years we have seen the Lord establish Grace Heritage Church with the 1689 Confession as our doctrinal basis and grow us to a body with over 50 members, two elders (one of them fully supported as a vocational pastor), two deacons, and about 80 attendees on an average Lord's Day. All of the original core people who remain in our area are still with us. We have enjoyed tremendous unity of vision and peace.

How did this wonderful blessing come about? The Lord used many people and providences as crucial instruments to birth our church. However, a key factor at the very beginning was the Lord opening my eyes to the role that a motivated layman can play in initiating a church planting effort. I believe many other laymen can play a similar role to serve as catalysts for church plants. I want to share what we learned from our successes and failures. My hope is that these observations will inspire and equip other laymen to lay the groundwork, initiate and promote Christ-centered Baptist church plants in their area.

Cultivate the Characteristics of an Effective Lay Leader

Scripture provides us with no specific qualifications for the role of lay leader in a new church plant; in fact, my purpose in this section is not primarily to deal with qualifications but with effectiveness.² However, I believe a brief look at qualifications is still necessary. At the very least, a layman who initiates a church plant or a vision for one must be able to define and articulate precisely the character of the church he envisions. Unless you immediately enlist outsiders to help, this will require some level of teaching. As James 3:1 reminds us: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” To the degree that you engage in public teaching, you must be able to measure up to this higher standard in life and doctrine. If you cannot, you must either give up the idea of leading in this way or become primarily a facilitator and immediately enlist outside help for teaching purposes. This will severely limit your effectiveness, since the need to articulate a vision for the church locally and from the inside will be vital and constant.

Although a lay leader in a church plant is not required to meet the qualifications of an elder/overseer/pastor (1 Timothy 3:2–7; Titus 1:5–9), you must consider how your character will reflect on a church plant that is at the stage where you may be the only representative of the idea of the church. Your life should demonstrate some level of maturity, consistency and freedom from glaring sin. Without this level of maturity, you would be advised to channel your energy into personal sanctification and wait for a greater level of maturity. In many respects, a lay leader will be in a position to serve in ways that are most appropriate for a pastor. To the degree that you meet the biblical qualifications, you will be more effective as a leader; you will have greater freedom in your own conscience and greater receptiveness from others to serve in this way.

In addition to qualifications, a number of important characteristics will mark an effective lay leader. In considering how you might encourage a church plant, you ought to be thinking first about how to prepare yourself to contribute to this task. First among these preparations is a clear understanding of what it means to be a Reformed Baptist.³ A solid, mature theological foundation is crucial to think through essentials and non-essentials. I recommend that a potential lay leader undertake a thorough study of the 1689 Confession as a mature, comprehensive, time-tested standard of what it means to be Reformed Baptist. Sam Waldron’s *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Confession* is a very helpful tool that I recommend as a guide to this study. Furthermore, you ought to expose yourself to as many Reformed Baptist pastors and churches as you can. In many respects, the teaching and practice of these churches can be more effectively caught than taught. Also, exposure to a variety of churches will enable you to discern what is essential to Reformed Baptist practice and what is incidental. Before I started down this path, the Lord had given me a great deal of exposure to solid churches and pastors. These churches and men served as extremely helpful models in our first baby

steps—and still do so today! Participation in online discussion groups and blogs that reflect a Reformed Baptist perspective can also provide valuable instruction and interaction.⁴

Second, you should have a broad and balanced view of the relationship between doctrine and the Christian life. Healthy Christian living is more than accepting the five points of Calvinism. A man who seems focused on the acceptance of a single doctrine or practice does not have a balanced view of life and doctrine and is not in a good position to articulate a vision for a new church. A man with a balanced, broad view of life and doctrine will be able to fellowship warmly even with Christians and denominations with which he has major doctrinal differences. You should see the gospel as the central theme of the Christian life and understand how to apply it in personal relationships as well as church priorities.

Third, a man who is willing, able and active in sharing the gospel will be a far more effective tool in a church plant than one who is not. Evangelism is a key to healthy church planting. A new church should not be thinking primarily in terms of drawing people from other churches but drawing people from the world into the church. I quickly realized this was an area of weakness for me, for which I had to repent and then stretch out of my comfort zone. If I had known earlier that church planting was on the horizon for me, I might have been more motivated to develop my skills and heart in this area. Partly as a result of my lack of leadership by example, evangelism remains an area where we as a body must particularly press ourselves to greater maturity. I especially encourage lay people to cultivate hospitality as a means of showing love and concern for others. Inviting people into your home is a non-threatening way to express your care and interest for others and is a great way to build relationships that lead to friendships and gospel opportunities. Our culture is so characterized by busyness and isolation that the very act of inviting people over for a simple meal will seem countercultural and extraordinary.

Fourth, a church plant will call for a great deal of entrepreneurial energy on the part of a lay leader. On a human level, starting a church is in many respects like starting a business. As the confession says, “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies.” You may be called upon to deal with all kinds of new challenges—legal, logistical and organizational. A man who is capable and motivated to tackle these challenges will be very effective in facilitating a church plant. A man who can summon a great deal of creative energy will find ways to solve problems, attract people and organize ministry.

Fifth, the stronger your people skills, the more effective you will be in the initial stages of a church plant. You will need to understand the fact that not everyone thinks the way you do. You will need to be sensitive to the needs and concerns and fears of others and pick up subtle messages in what people say and don't say. A man who is humble enough to relate transparently to others about his own sin and weakness will encourage others to be transparent and real with him. A man who is a good listener will minister to others and learn how to encourage them. Early

on, I realized how much I needed to grow in this way (and still do), particularly in relating to people who are not as doctrinally driven as I am. I'm thankful that God quickly raised up others—especially my wife Debbie—who could compensate me in this area.

Sixth, a married lay leader in a church plant absolutely must have his wife on board with his desire and vision. I remember coming home night after night in the first days of considering a church plant, bursting with ideas to share with Debbie. She listened patiently for weeks. Finally, I remarked one evening that my personal discomfort was not a good enough reason to start a church and shared with her some of my positive vision of what a new church could be. In response, Debbie told me that that was the first time she felt excited about a church plant. I learned a couple of very important lessons from that exchange: 1) I was doing too much talking and not enough listening to my wife; and 2) a viable vision for a church plant has to be about something more than what's wrong with other nearby churches. There will be many disappointments and gut-wrenching experiences and challenges to your energy and schedule in a church plant attempt. You and your wife must be unified in your vision to weather these challenges together and maintain a shared vision.

Seventh, you need to be a man of prayer. No amount of skill, planning or technique can bring a church into being. Jesus said that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18), and He hasn't given that prerogative to others. This truth should drive you to the throne of grace to plead with the Head of the church to build His church. You should look to the Lord for wisdom about whether He is calling you as His tool to pursue that through church planting. And if you proceed with this, you will quickly discover that you need wisdom and strength from above every step of the way. In all that is said here about strategies and methods, don't lose sight of the fact that these are merely tools in Christ's hand to use as He sees fit.

After reading a list like this, a natural reaction is to throw up our hands in defeat! After all, who among us has developed all these characteristics to maturity? I am not advocating that these characteristics be regarded as qualifications for a layman to initiate a church plant. Rather, you need to be able to assess soberly your own level of preparation and potential effectiveness and plan accordingly. I advocate that you do what you can with the gifts and graces that God has given you. You may need to go very slowly. You will most likely need outside help in certain areas. And you must understand that the first work of church planting—even for a layman—is the work of preparing yourself by cultivating these characteristics. In the process of preparing yourself, you may also reap the benefit of greater patience with your present church situation.

Show Respect to Spiritual Leadership

Scripture does not command you to go out and start a new church, but it does require that you “respect those who...are over you in the Lord” (1 Thessalonians

5:12) and “obey your leaders and submit to them” (Hebrews 13:17). The respect and obedience that you owe are required even if you are planning to leave your present church situation. Respect and submission may be quite a challenge in these circumstances, but you can respect the man for his office even if you have serious points of difference.

You should begin by being open about your desire for biblical doctrine and practice. Share your heart with your pastor. He cannot shepherd you properly if he has no idea what is stirring in your heart. It may be that he is looking for some encouragement from his sheep to implement changes in the church where you are already a member. It may be that he needs to be challenged respectfully and gently to rethink his doctrine and practice. A direct challenge may be completely unnecessary. If you simply share the burden of your convictions, he will make the connection without your turning the meeting into a confrontation. You should give some serious thought beforehand about how to articulate your concerns in as gracious a manner as possible.

Whatever you do, don't simply disappear from your present church. You owe your pastor an explanation. You owe him a window into your own soul before you get to the point where you have already decided to leave. You owe him the opportunity to study and consider and make changes in your present congregation. You owe yourself an occasion for having your attitude exposed and corrected. Your patience and submissive spirit could very well inspire changes and bear glorious fruit for reformation without the need to plant a new church!

If hope of progress still appears slim in your own church, you should do a thorough investigation of other churches in your area before considering a church plant. Many pastors are laboring for reformation in their flocks with little support and encouragement from the sheep. You may have a much larger impact by moving to a church where you can encourage and support gospel-centered reformation. Be very careful here; if a new church is started near a church that is just beginning reformation, the new church might draw a few solid members from the existing church and stall the work of reformation there.

After a full investigation, a church plant may be the only option. If so, you may be able to enlist the support of your pastor and church leaders to plant a new church with a Reformed basis. Of course, if your pastor believes Calvinism is rank heresy, he is not likely to support such an effort! But he may see the differences as simply matters of style or emphasis or minor differences of conviction. He may relish the idea of encouraging another church plant, particularly if he doesn't see it as a threat to his own congregation. In fact, he may see it as an opportunity to get rid of some troublesome Calvinists!

If your present church desires to support a church planting effort, but does not share your theological convictions, be sure to find another more like-minded church to be the primary sponsor. Otherwise, you may find your vision watered down or hijacked by your present church. This needs to be settled at the very outset. Your present church leadership should understand that you want the primary

leadership to come from a church that shares your vision of the doctrine and philosophy of ministry for the new church.

Once you have determined that a church plant effort is necessary, demonstrate submission by asking your present church leadership for guidelines on what you can and cannot do and say to other church members about your efforts. Then do what they ask to the extent that your conscience allows. I asked for guidelines from my pastor, and we were asked by the elders not to initiate any discussion about it with church members. We were allowed to answer basic questions but were not given permission to recruit. Although these guidelines were difficult to follow, I thought they were completely fair and understandable. I suggested to my pastor that some men in the church might be disqualified from serving as elders or deacons due only to their baptistic convictions. I asked for permission to speak with such men in the hope that they would be free to use their gifts in a Reformed Baptist church. The elders instead offered to talk with these men themselves and then leave it to them to initiate contact with me. I thought their suggestion was wiser than my initial request. I had no desire to stir up a mass exodus or to appear to be operating out from under the authority of my shepherds. I wanted to set an example of godly submission even in the process of leaving. I believe the Lord gave grace to make that happen, and I still maintain a good relationship with the leaders of our former church. Demonstrating respect to your present leadership is a challenging but necessary discipline in the effort to start a new church.

You should also beware of removing yourself from under spiritual leadership in the process of pursuing a church plant. If your present pastors are unwilling or unable to provide this oversight to you, you should seek oversight from a mentor church. You need oversight both for yourself personally and for the work of planting a church. Church planting is serious business; the name of Christ is bound up in this effort, and the eternal souls of people are involved. While you have the freedom to explore possibilities and network with like-minded believers, you should not ordinarily go as far as establishing a church without the oversight of godly elders. Furthermore, the process of church planting will expose you to a number of spiritual dangers and temptations, and you need oversight in this situation even more than in ordinary circumstances.

Gauge Interest and Gather a Core Group

When the Lord began to stir in us an intense desire for a new church, we didn't know of a single other Reformed Baptist in our entire county. For a long time, this fact kept us from any serious consideration of the possibility of a church plant. If we didn't know a single other interested individual, then it seemed foolish even to hope for a church plant, much less to help start one!

However, the Lord lifted our hopes beyond our circumstances and enabled us to think more creatively and more deeply than we had before. I remembered an acquaintance who had expressed to me some sentiments that seemed generally

compatible with Reformed Baptist convictions; Tom had also told me he'd rather plant a church than undertake the massive building program that his church had begun. I invited him out to lunch and shared my heart. He was immediately interested. After a couple of months of praying over the idea and overcoming his wife Brenda's initial (and understandable!) reluctance, he became my partner in the early steps of planting a church. Brenda also grew to be a great encourager and prayer partner.

An early project of mine was to put together a basic web site. This is a very important tool for a church plant effort! The site should explain the vision, the doctrinal commitments, any regular meetings or Bible studies that are scheduled, and contact information (phone number and email address at the least).⁵ The site should be submitted to the major search engines and listed in as many other places you can think of, including the Founders-friendly churches list and the 9Marks church list.⁶ This will allow people to find you. It also serves as a resource you can refer to in advertising as well as conversations with individuals about your vision. The site doesn't have to be fancy, but it should look clean and professional. With even basic computer skills you can set up a web site without any specialized knowledge.⁷ If this seems too scary, hire a student to do the work for you. If you have some content and a few images to use, even a professional web designer can put together a nice web site for a reasonable price.

You should consider placing an ad in your local paper to see if you can find other interested people. The purpose at this stage is to gather a core of like-minded people, not to appeal to the general population. We decided to place a simple ad that highlighted the term "doctrines of grace" in the context of a new Baptist church. We figured this was a good code phrase that would be meaningful to like-minded people without raising red flags with others. We referenced the web site in the ad and gave a phone number. The ad netted exactly one contact. However, this contact proved crucial. Mike and Suellen and their family became a vital part of our core group.

At this point, we began a weekly Bible study. A Bible study can be a very effective means of building relationships and clarifying vision, as well as providing an avenue for introducing new people to the church plant effort. We used Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* as an outline for our study. This was followed by a study through the book of Romans. During this time, several other families and individuals visited our Bible study and checked us out; a few of those stayed with us.

Broader neighborhood Bible studies may also be effective in introducing people to a Reformed view of the gospel and church life. Bringing people to Christ through an evangelistic study is also a wonderful strategy. One man I spoke with began with a monthly Friday night study complete with a meal and fellowship. They brought in a skilled Bible teacher from a sister church a few hours away. This approach proved very effective in drawing a solid core of people.

Another strategy to consider is to contact area pastors. They may be willing to refer you to people in their congregation who have Reformed convictions that are not shared by the church. I contacted area Presbyterian pastors to ask if they had any Reformed Baptist members who would be happier and more effective in a Reformed Baptist church. Some large-hearted pastors may even desire to send out a few mature “missionary” families to help you gather a critical mass of people and to provide help for the everyday tasks of a church planting effort.

You should also check out the list of Founders-friendly individuals and contact those who are nearby.⁸ I would recommend contacting people in a fairly wide radius around your location. Even if they are too far to be involved, they may know others who are closer but who aren’t listed. You might also consider trying to obtain contacts through other Reformed-oriented organizations and ministries. We purchased a mailing list from WORLD Magazine⁹ and sent out a letter to area subscribers about our efforts.

Another strategy is to use various Christian ministry networks in the area to get to know Reformed-minded believers. Your local crisis pregnancy center or Christian food bank or rescue mission may be a place where you can be involved in worthy ministry and get to know others outside your own church circle. You may also be able to post an announcement at local Christian bookstores.

I realized early in the process that I really didn’t know that many people in my community. I had acquaintances at work (most of whom weren’t Christians) and many friends at church (who were off-limits to my core-group gathering efforts). That was about it. This realization pushed us to get to know our neighbors better and to consider getting involved in various community activities. Children’s sports teams are a great way to get to know parents; coaching is even better! Civic organizations are another place to meet people and expand your network.

Finally, there is nothing better than to lead people to Christ! If at the very beginning you can establish a culture of warm-hearted evangelism, this will be a great blessing in helping the church to be what the church ought to be—a place where sinners meet the Savior and are transformed by the gospel of free grace. New Christians often have very little of the church-culture baggage of long-time Christians and can often make very zealous and teachable church members. Having some mature Christians in the core group is also crucial for stability and perspective and discernment.

Think Through Basic Issues

When I first began to contemplate the idea of a church plant, I had little idea what was involved. I began to talk with everyone I knew who had some experience or expertise in church planting. This was a very helpful process for me. I received both information and encouragement from men who had been in the trenches. By the time I was ready to take some concrete steps, I had some idea of how to proceed and the issues I was likely to encounter.

Before you begin to think about the logistics of church planting, you should give some thought to the primary issues that will shape the identity and character of the church. The 9Marks web site¹⁰ has a large number of very instructive articles to help you think through many of the issues and forces a new church will face. Your job is not to create your own vision; Christ is the head of the church! Your job is to discern what Christ has ordained for the church according to the Scriptures and then to use Christian prudence to flesh this out. You will be better equipped to do this if you have given some thought to paradigms such as the seeker-sensitive church, the purpose-driven church, the emerging church, and the missional church.¹¹

The family-integrated church is another paradigm to consider. This paradigm commits the church as a matter of principle to keep families together for the vast majority of church activities and emphasizes the role of fathers in the Christian education of their children. A number of Reformed Baptist plants have become a part of this movement. An advantage of this approach is that it tends to fit well with the overall philosophy of ministry and view of children that Reformed Baptists hold. You may also attract some homeschooling families through this commitment, even if they have no initial commitment to the doctrines of grace. The down side is that you may have trouble attracting anyone *other* than homeschooling families. You will have to determine whether this approach is essential to the right ordering of church life. You will want to weigh whether you have the freedom to employ other teaching patterns on a regular basis. You may desire to target teaching to specific sub-groups and employ a broader range of teaching gifts. You may want to employ non-integrated structures for the sake of those who have broken or disordered homes or who simply don't appreciate the value of family-integrated ministry. On the other hand, you may find great value in structuring your teaching and activities by family units, at least on certain occasions.¹²

Other issues that you will encounter are the role of youth groups, the style of music, and the use of small groups. You will need to consider whether these are essential to your vision for a church or non-essential issues that can be worked out by consensus or in submission to future leadership. While these issues may appear to be minor, they are often the primary reason why people choose a church or ultimately leave a church. Therefore, they bear some consideration in advance.

Another issue that should be considered is affiliation with an association of churches. The primary options for a Reformed Baptist Church are ARBCA (Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America), FIRE (Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals), and the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention). Churches can be aligned with none or all of these if they choose to and meet the qualifications.

Many churches have found encouragement within the SBC due to the growth of the Founders movement and the fellowship among SBC churches that are reclaiming the Reformed theology of the founders of the SBC.¹³ We determined that in our context SBC affiliation would give us some immediate

credibility without unduly stereotyping us.¹⁴ The SBC has significant resources available for church planters through the North American Mission Board, state conventions, and local associations. Some Calvinistic men have found support for church planting through the SBC. In some cases, Calvinistic convictions—and more particularly the philosophy of ministry and church growth that Calvinism implies—can become obstacles to obtaining church planting support through the SBC.

FIRE and ARBCA are smaller associations of churches that Reformed Baptist church plants can look to. Both are enthusiastic about church planting. ARBCA is the most specifically Reformed Baptist of the three groups. Your church will be required to adopt the 1689 Confession as part of membership in ARBCA. A decision about affiliation does not have to be made up front. However, the affiliation you pursue may open up specific resources for church planting.

The doctrinal statement you use is also important. The 1689 Confession is probably the most well loved and recognized doctrinal statement among Reformed Baptists. In fact, some will not consider your church to be a bona fide Reformed Baptist church if you use a different confession! Some will object to its length or its archaic language. Others will find it unduly narrow because of its strong statement on the law and the Christian Sabbath. I believe these stated positions are essential to a mature expression of Reformed Baptist theology, so this is a reason to adopt rather than reject the 1689. The archaic language can be compensated by using a modern-language version as a teaching tool. We use the Abstract of Principles as a shorter summary of the confession for those who want to know what we believe but don't have the patience to read through the full confession. Some have chosen to use the New Hampshire Confession as a more modern, less detailed expression of Reformed Baptist doctrine.¹⁵ Keep in mind that a confession is to guide the teaching of the church, not to serve as a test for membership.

Once you have a clear vision and doctrinal basis established, work at finding ways to communicate the essence of your vision in an attractive, nontechnical way in just a few sentences. You will have countless opportunities to share in casual conversation what the Lord is doing. However, most people won't have the patience for a long explanation about the Calvinistic roots of the SBC, the details of the doctrine of election, or the implications of Reformed theology in church practice. Few people will be able to appreciate why a difference on the doctrine of election justifies starting a new church. You also don't want to define yourself primarily in contrast to other churches. You want a healthier, more Christ-centered church; that does not imply that all other churches have become synagogues of Satan!

A large number of helpful resources are available to those who want to be educated about logistical issues involved in church planting. A lay leader can take advantage of many of the same educational resources as a church planting pastor. The more you know about church planting, the better equipped you will be to guide and help.

The following web sites and organizations have much useful information about church planting:

- **newchurches.com** — NewChurches church planting web site by Ed Stetzer. This is a comprehensive site that contains information about church planter assessment, reading recommendations on church planting, and church planting forums.
- **www.redeemer2.com/rcpc/rcpc** — Church planting site of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. They have a specific focus on planting churches in urban areas. The site contains some thought-provoking articles as well as manuals on church planting.
- **graceplanting.com** — Grace Church Planting Ministries, the ministry of Bill Lollar. Bill has a great deal of experience in planting gospel-centered Baptist churches both in the U.S. and Wales. He has some good articles online. Bill is also very helpful in responding to questions about church planting.
- **acts29network.org** — Acts 29 Network. This network encourages the planting of churches that plant churches. Their doctrinal commitment is Reformed, and their outlook is missional. They have a strong commitment to contextualization that may intrigue some and concern others, but you will find much encouragement and wisdom on their web site.
- **www.trinitybaptist-wamego.org/church.htm** — Spurgeon Center for Biblical Church Planting. The web page only contains contact information, but these fellow Reformed Baptists have a lot of church planting experience and enthusiasm and are willing to provide direct interaction about church planting.

Prepare for Common Problems

Church planting involves people, and people are sinners. It is no surprise then that problems arise when sinners are brought together in new relationships and contexts. Some of these problems may show up in the very early stages, before there is a settled structure or an experienced pastor to help address them. Knowing about some of the more common problems will help you be mentally prepared for them. In some cases the Lord may choose to use your advance planning to avoid a problem altogether.

A common problem in church plants is malcontented people. By that I mean people who tend to be dissatisfied no matter what the circumstances are. These people believe that their discontent stems from their church circumstances, so they leave for greener pastures that a church plant seems to promise. Then they discover that the church plant causes just as much discontent as their previous

church. Listen closely to people's reasons for leaving their previous church, and watch out for those who seem unduly critical. Make much of the gospel with them, but be prepared to suggest (or insist!) that a church plant won't meet their expectations.

One of the more frustrating scenarios is meeting people who share your theological convictions but who have no interest in planting a church. Some believe these things intellectually but place more importance on programs or stability or existing relationships. Others simply have no stomach for church planting in all its unpredictability and hard work. Much of this is understandable. We need to recognize that not everyone is called to or equipped for planting a church.

Often, you may get initial interest from people who really don't share your vision or theology. Sometimes, people will agree that something radically different is needed in church, but they don't necessarily agree on what that different thing should be. You have to be prepared for these kinds of disappointments. Resist the urge to say what people want to hear, and be up front about the kind of vision you have for a healthy church and its doctrinal foundation.

You will also be challenged to compromise on nearly every point that you believe is important. You need to be very clear in your own understanding about what is non-negotiable and what is secondary in a church plant. An extremely long, detailed list of non-negotiables may result in a church of one! Be sure that the items you consider essential are based on biblical and historical precedent and are not merely personal preferences.

Don't be afraid to ask for help from area pastors and churches. But don't be surprised when you run into turf-protecting attitudes. Two area pastors who initially gave verbal encouragement to our efforts disappointed us when our requests for some minimal concrete help were rebuffed. On the other hand, one pastor rejected an initial request for help when he learned we were Calvinists. But later, he came back and voluntarily led his church to provide some significant financial help after relationships were established and he got to know our hearts and intentions. The Lord uses these kinds of experiences to show us that He is the one who builds His church, not us!

You also need to prepare yourself to relinquish some control as the group grows, especially once a pastor is called. One of the best ways to do this is to establish a leadership team early on in which the members agree to guide the church plant according to the doctrinal statement and vision. You will eventually have to learn to defer to a pastor who has experience, training and recognized spiritual authority that you don't have. Even if you are recognized at the outset as an elder, you will eventually be operating in the context of a plurality of elders in shared leadership. Guard your heart against a controlling mentality. Welcome the gifts and leadership of others even when it doesn't fit your personal preferences or viewpoints on minor matters.

Most of all, be prepared to repent. Just as the closeness of marriage reveals the depths of sin, the closeness of relationships in a church plant will do the same.

You will discover sinful weaknesses that you never knew. It will be all too easy to allow your organizational agenda to take priority over people and their needs. You will make errors in your judgment that bring pain and difficulty to others. All of these experiences will give you an opportunity to live out the gospel. The more you believe the gospel, the more you will be prepared to humble yourself and seek forgiveness from the Lord and from others. Learn to do so quickly and sincerely.

Protect the Vision for the Church

I was convinced that I was called to pursue a Reformed Baptist church plant. So I was very concerned in the early stages to protect and solidify the vision for the church plant. I didn't want to pour a great deal of energy into a Reformed Baptist church plant only to have the doctrinal center or overall philosophy shifted by a new consensus among the initial core group. People who respond to a church plant opportunity often have very different ideas of what the church will look like even if they are using the same terminology. Also, some will respond to the opportunity for something different even if they aren't attracted by your solution to the problems they perceive in other churches. Furthermore, a layman will not naturally carry the same authority as a pastor. The church vision you believe is most God-honoring may very well be voted out if you don't prepare. How can you protect this vision?

I believe there are several strategies that can be employed at the very beginning to protect the vision for the church. First among these is to establish a confession up front. By "up front" I mean from the very first conversation with the second person who is brought in on the idea. If people are introduced to the church plant with the notion that a particular doctrinal statement is part of the very idea, they will more likely decide at the beginning whether they can live with that or not. If not, they won't hang around. If so, they aren't likely to make an issue of it later. This doesn't mean that they completely understand or agree with or even know the full contents of the confession. After all, the 1689 Confession can take an hour at one sitting to read thoughtfully! But they will understand that the doctrinal position has been fully disclosed and is not a negotiable element.

To reinforce the place of the confession, you can either study through the confession with your core group or occasionally quote from it in Bible study as you encounter various doctrinal issues that it addresses. Be aware that even some who call themselves Reformed Baptists will be unfamiliar with the concept of a confessional church. You will have to demonstrate clearly what it means to use the confession as a subordinate standard. Don't quote the confession to end disagreements. Show that the confession is supported by Scripture, and use it to summarize the teaching of Scripture. Sometimes a disagreement will remain after appealing to the Scriptures. If so, you'll need to state graciously that the confession holds no authority over the conscience but that it will serve as an arbiter in this church plant over what is taught when differences of conviction arise.

Another key strategy to solidify and build unity of vision is to publish a written vision statement at the outset.¹⁶ You will attract (or repel!) people based on the vision statement. The vision statement should describe as specifically as possible what the church will look like in its maturity. It will serve as a target. If others read this and don't want to aim at that target, they will be unlikely to come alongside and try to steer in a different direction. Your vision statement should aim to inspire, not just inform. It should generate excitement! One of our core women told me in the early days that she wanted to go back and read the vision statement on a regular basis because it got her excited all over again about what we were doing.

You may also consider producing a written plan up front for progressing through each step toward becoming a church. For example, when you have so many committed families and individuals, you will begin a Sunday evening meeting. When you grow to this level, you will ask for financial commitments. When you have this many people and this much of a financial commitment, you will seek a part-time or full-time pastor. When you get to a certain number, you will begin Sunday morning worship services with an interim pastor. After a particular point is reached (number of committed individuals, number of elder candidates), you will covenant together formally as an independent church body. A plan like this will help people avoid the feeling that your group is just wandering aimlessly, vaguely hoping that something good will eventually happen spontaneously. It also gives you specific goals to anticipate and work toward.

You can provide further stability for your vision by establishing a lay leadership committee and a procedure for adding members to it. Members of the committee should be required to be godly men who will commit to work toward the vision and respect the doctrinal statement. Creating a recognized leadership group will provide more weight to the direction of the church plant. Our church constitution spells out how to form such a committee and how this committee is superseded by a body of elders once they are recognized.¹⁷

A crucial step in the very beginning is to establish a relationship with a mentor church. The relationship needs to be spelled out very clearly. Will the church provide elder oversight to the church plant or to particular men in leadership, or will their role be advisory only? I sought out a relationship through Pastor Phil Newton with the elders of South Woods Baptist Church in Germantown, Tennessee. This relationship was established when we were only two committed families, and it was very helpful! Pastor Newton made himself available for a multitude of emails and cell-phone calls from this bewildered layman time and time again. He always had wise counsel and words of encouragement. His church prayed regularly for us and provided some financial assistance when we called a pastor. This relationship reaped immeasurable blessings!

You should think carefully about the kind of relationship you establish as well as the kind of church with which you establish it. The kind of church they will be interested in establishing is most likely the kind of church that they are. They will need to be humble enough to respect the intuition that the local leaders have

about your situation and not try to squeeze you into their mold in areas that are non-essential. On the other hand, if they don't take some level of ownership over what you're trying to do, then they probably won't be motivated to offer a great deal of help. Look for help from those with whom you already have some connection or affinity. Geographical proximity can be a big plus as well. If the mentor church can regularly or even occasionally provide you with a skilled, grace-filled preacher or teacher, this provision will greatly bless your church planting efforts.

Plan to Call a Pastor

A major milestone in the life of a church plant will be the calling of a pastor. In a sense, a layman who initiates a church plant is trying to work himself out of a job. He should long for the day when a gifted, trained, recognized, and experienced man can step in and begin to do pastoral labor among the sheep. Others can invite people, build web sites, find a meeting facility, and track finances, but only a pastor can bring the full authority and blessing of the office of overseer to the people of God. A pastor who is freed from at least some other vocational duties will be able to focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer, which are the backbones of genuine church health and growth (Acts 6:4,7). Furthermore, the presence of a pastor demonstrates a seriousness to the work that clearly sets it apart from a mere Bible study or a dream of a church. How do you go about financing and identifying a church planting pastor?

First of all, be encouraged! In our search, we quickly realized that there are many solid, experienced men who would prefer to labor bi-vocationally than try to lead an entrenched existing church in reformation. A partial salary may be sufficient at first to attract a mature man with training and experience.

Begin saving for the future right now. You don't know how long it will take to lay a foundation and gather a core group; in the meantime, you may be able to set aside a significant amount of money. This realization was a huge factor for me in my initial motivation to begin a church planting effort. I could actually see the realistic hope of saving enough money over time to help bring in a pastor, and that was enough to get me started.

Your core group should be challenged with this idea as well. If three families were to commit to saving \$3000 per year for three years, you would have a \$27,000 nest egg from which you could fund a year of generous part-time salary. As the Lord brought together a core group in our situation, the other members caught this vision and were prepared to demonstrate that financially. Our core group took the approach of committing to a year of full-time salary, which was well beyond our means for the long term but was a rate we could sustain for a year. We hoped that the presence of a pastor would attract others to the work. The Lord chose to bless this effort with growth, both numerically and financially. Through nearly four years, we have had no trouble at all keeping our pastor fully paid.

Once you begin saving as a core group, consider asking your mentor church to do the collecting and financial work. This will allow you to count your contribution immediately as a tax deduction, transfer the paperwork burden to an organization that is already set up for it, and guarantee that the money will be available to the group when it is needed. Also, when the core group begins to see the collective pot grow, that will encourage further generosity and enthusiasm. The mentor church should provide some assurances about the use of the money if a church plant does not pan out within a certain time frame.

As the Lord enables you financially to provide some support for a pastor, you will need to begin a search for the right man. Your mentor church should be able to help with this task. As much as possible, you should network with existing churches to obtain candidate recommendations. Another very helpful resource is the Minister Search forum on the Founders Ministries web site.¹⁸ The purpose of this forum is to bring together churches that are looking for Founders-friendly ministers with Founders-friendly ministers who are looking for interested churches.¹⁹ We used both our mentor church and the Minister Search forum to obtain candidates. Ultimately, the Lord brought Pastor Paul Stith to us through a suggestion from Pastor Newton of our mentoring church.

Your mentor church should provide advice, counsel and help with screening and interviewing candidates. However, unless the mentor church is actually a mother church, financing and sending a pastor to plant a church, they should not choose a pastor for you unilaterally. They are not the ones who will ultimately finance the pastor or live under his ministry. The core group is in a better position to know what is needed in their own context as well as the kind of personality that will mesh with their group. I have seen a church plant fail over this very mistake, when the mentor church attempted to dictate the pastor choice to the core group. The core group should recognize and call a pastor with the advice and counsel of the mentor church.

Due diligence in evaluating candidates is an absolute must. Don't be afraid to bombard candidates with detailed questions about doctrine and philosophy of ministry as well as their organizational and relational skills.²⁰ You also need to have some assurance that their personal and family life are above reproach. One of the best ways to do this is to look at candidates who are already well known to people whom you know and trust. A second option is to obtain references and then make sure you get the unvarnished truth from them. If someone who knows a candidate well has nothing negative to say about him, this may indicate that you're not getting a full, candid picture of the man.

Don't expect your pastor to be a one-man show. A man who can preach, counsel, do music, administrate, and demonstrate entrepreneurial skills will be a rare find indeed. Our pastor was quite up front with us that he had never even started a lemonade stand, much less a church! We did not expect him to be an entrepreneur but to come among us and preach the Word and demonstrate warm-hearted

shepherding. One value of lay people taking initiative is that you will develop a culture of serving the church that can and should continue after a pastor is called and free him for the work of the ministry. These varied gifts will also lay a foundation for identifying and appreciating a diverse plural eldership in the church.

Conclusion

Establishing a church is God's work, not ours. We are utterly dependent on Him every step of the way. He may or may not use every attempt we make or do so according to our timetable. However, He does choose to use various means in the process of establishing a church. He may even choose to use the feeble means of a layman taking initiative, just to demonstrate His power and glory.

Clearly, taking the initiative to start a church is a lot of work. Don't let this discourage you! First, you don't have to do all these things all at once. Think in terms of years rather than weeks. Second, you don't have to do all these things alone. If no other interested people emerge, then continue to network and pray and wait. But if others do come on board, then spread the labor and the blessing. Also, if the work is well justified, you are likely to find a church that is willing to provide a great deal of help. My hope is that this article will also save you much floundering around without guidance. Finally, I pray that your eyes have been opened now to some ways to get the ball rolling and that you're inspired to make the effort for the glory of God and the good of His elect. ☺

Notes:

¹ See <http://reformedbaptistfellowship.wordpress.com/2007/08/13/a-laymans-guide-to-church-planting-part-7-plan-to-call-a-pastor/>

² I am assuming here that the lay leader is a man. While there are many things a woman can do to encourage a church plant and can learn from this article, the kind of leadership required for this task is something of a proto-elder/deacon and will most naturally fit the role of a man in the church.

³ I am using the term *Reformed Baptist* as a theological rather than a denominational or church-cultural term.

⁴ I recommend the Reformed Baptist Discussion list (www.rblast.org), which I moderate, as a place to find good interaction about knotty practical and theological problems.

⁵ Anyone is free to use or modify any of the content or design elements at our church web site www.graceheritage.org without attribution.

⁶ See www.founders.org and www.9marks.org.

⁷ You can find very reasonable hosting rates, as well as site builder software, at www.ipowerweb.com, www.godaddy.com and many other providers. www.churchplantmedia.com provides a complete web site solution for church plants.

⁸ See wwwFOUNDERS.org.

⁹ See www.worldmag.com.

¹⁰ See www.9marks.org.

¹¹ The concept of the missional church as articulated by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, brings a powerful challenge to the inward-looking tendencies of many Reformed churches. For a brief overview, I recommend reading “The Missional Church” at http://citychurchsf.org/articles/missional_church.htm.

¹² Grace Heritage Church has adopted a hybrid approach, using family-integrated teaching and activity whenever the subject matter allows for it. See the “Children’s Bible Study Vision and Structure” statement in our member handbook at www.graceheritage.org/resources/handbook.pdf

¹³ See wwwFOUNDERS.org.

¹⁴ See www.graceheritage.org/resources/sbc.pdf for an analysis of the pros and cons of SBC affiliation.

¹⁵ See the article “Should you use the 1689 London Confession in your church?” by Shawn Wright at www.9marks.org and the extended response “How (and Why) Your Church Should Hold to the 1689 Confession” by Sam Waldron in *The Founders Journal*, 61 (Summer 2005), 14–21, 26.

¹⁶ Our vision statement is on our church web site, www.graceheritage.org.

¹⁷ Our constitution can be found in our church handbook. See fn 12.

¹⁸ See wwwFOUNDERS.org.

¹⁹ Founders-friendly in this context implies baptistic and committed to the doctrines of grace. It does not mean that the church or individual is affiliated with the SBC. It also encompasses a broader spectrum of men and churches than the label “Reformed Baptist” typically implies.

²⁰ See “Questions for a Prospective Pastor” by Jim Elliff and Don Whitney at <http://www.ccwonline.org/quest.html>.

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