

To Plant or Not to Plant? The Debate

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- Video: Needs in North America

The Bible says this of Jesus:

"When He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest'" (Matthew 9:36-38 NKJV).

- **Canada and the United States of America are teeming with masses of people who need the Lord.** Jesus “was moved with compassion for them.” Did you hear the heart of that church planter as he shared how he’d led this man to Christ and subsequently how the couple got involved in the church? That’s what church planting is all about. It’s about people saved and lives changed.

In this session, we’re going to talk about why that’s important. The issue is this: *To Plant or Not to Plant?* Or are there other issues that are more important? Herein lies the debate. So today as we begin I want to focus in on . . .

The (Attendance) *Decline* of the American Church and the *Rise* of Church Planting

- The situation in the North America churches calls us to examine how we’re doing things and to see if we can develop a variety of pragmatic strategies that will reverse the trend. Notice first that there is a . . .

⊕ Decline

- **80-85% of American Churches are in the down side of their life cycle.** ¹
 - In 1900, the Census Bureau counted 212,320 churches. In 1995, 345,406 churches existed in the U.S. During that same time period, the U.S. population tripled. Today there are fewer churches per person than there were in 1906.² We may be tempted to explain this situation by thinking that this pertains to liberals and non-evangelicals. And while it is true that by comparison evangelicals are doing better, the sad truth is that . . .
- **The majority of conservative evangelical churches are in decline.**³
- **3,500 to 4,000 churches close each year.**⁴
 - Church attendance continues to decline as a percent of the population.

But...

...Jesus said he would BUILD his church and the gates of Hades would never overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)

⊕ Church Planting:

- **Between 1980-2000, over 60,000 churches were planted.⁵**
- **Less than 1/8 of these new church starts were by mainline denominations.**
- **Church planting is regaining its Biblical prominence in evangelical life.**
 - Douglas Beggs of NAMB discovered during his doctoral research that a new trend in popularity for church planting began somewhere around 1985.⁶ A multitude of books have come on the market in the last 10 years focusing in on the subject. Seminaries are hiring more and more church planting professors. All of this tells us that it's now more acceptable to plant churches than it was before 1985. There's a church planting movement beginning to take place and we must take advantage of this trend in North America and plant thousands of new churches now.
- **The North American Mission Board plans to help start 60,000 churches by 2020.**
 - This will be carried out through partnerships between local churches, associations, state conventions. But the question is. . .

⊕ Who will plant these churches?

- Video: Factoid: Excuses about why churches don't plant churches.
Not enough money: "The budget of the church says that it's just impossible!"
Not Enough Leadership: "We just can't afford to lose our good people!"
Not Enough Members: "When we get 1,000 we'll consider it."
In three years, Calvario Baptist Church in Corpus Christi, Texas has started 31 missions.
Calvario has only 332 members.

What did Isaiah say?

⊕ "Here am I. Send..." Who?

- Who will the Lord send to the great unchurched cities of North America?
And what about the communities and rural areas without an evangelical witness? How about all the suburban areas where young families have moved up and in but still attend no church. Who will the Lord send? Maybe He'll send you. Many young adults today have a passion to do something new and fresh in the Kingdom of God. Church planting is the most attractive option to many of these future leaders.

⊕ Biblical Reasons for Church Starting⁷

- **New Churches Extend the Kingdom of God.**
 - The terminology here is important because in some mission agencies and denominations, the term for church planting is church extension. A church plant is considered to be an extension of another church. And the idea is that new churches extend the Kingdom of God .
- **New Churches Enlarge the People of God.**
 - New churches reaching lost people bring about the enlargement of God's people. In communities and cities, as new church plants do what they do best...evangelism, God's Kingdom is growing. God's Holy Spirit is working in obedient hearts to multiply believers. Paul described the process like that of a garden when he wrote: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6 NIV). So it is the people of God letting Him work through them to enlarge the Kingdom.
- **New Churches Can Reproduce Themselves.**
 - New churches reproduce themselves more readily than established churches. In new churches there tends to be a fresh spirit of excitement. People are thrilled at being used by God and they want to see their small "movement" continued in other places. We see it in the pages of the New Testament and in many modern-day examples.

- **New Churches Can Proclaim a Contextual Gospel.**

- The message of the New Testament never changes. Jude says we are to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NKJV). So our message never changes! We stand firmly upon God’s Word. But the context within which we carry out the mission regularly changes. Ours is an incarnational ministry whereby Christ lives out His purposes through us to reach a particular people group. And new churches are better able to couple an unchanging theology with a flexible methodology in order to more effectively win people to Christ.

- **New Churches Can Effectively Make Disciples.**

- Growth in the teachings of the faith is an expectation in many new churches. Church planters have discovered that they are more able to “raise the bar” of expectations in a new church than are their counterparts who are pastoring more traditional churches. George Barna writes, “Before believers act like Christians they must learn to think like Christians.”⁸ And the critical expectations of discipleship are more easily taught in a new church environment among new believers.

⊕ Experiential Reasons for Church Starting

- Video: Barbara Oden on starting a church wherever there are people.
- **Expanding Populations Need New Congregations.**
 - The first thing that may come to mind is the idea of planting new churches in suburban setting with expanding populations. And while there is certainly a need in the suburbs, there are other places that need churches as well. Areas of a town that are transitioning to a particular ethnic group are in need of new congregations. The incredible growth of the Hispanic population in the United States presents a great opportunity for new churches.
- **Established Churches Tend to Plateau.**
 - As mentioned in the last session, there needs to be a balance in helping these churches and planting new churches.

- **New Churches are Flexible and Adaptable.**

- New churches are good at adapting to changing situation. When Rick Warren planted Saddleback Church, continuous growth required flexibility. He wrote: “We often said that Saddleback was the church you could attend—if you could find us. . . . We used four different high schools, numerous elementary schools, bank buildings, recreational centers, theaters, community centers, restaurants, large homes, professional office buildings, and stadiums, until finally we erected a 2,300-seat high-tech tent.”⁹

- **No One Church Can Reach Everyone.**

- There is a need both for the traditional “suit and tie” church and the informal “come as you are” church. People who are unaccustomed to the expectations of the traditional church are more likely to attend an informal worship setting. And the opposite is true too; traditional people may be uncomfortable where there is no dress code. But it doesn’t mean one is good and one is bad. It does mean that it takes many kinds of churches to reach many kinds of people. Too often many traditional churches look down on those who don’t practice to their way of doing things.

This was a problem in early mission work. Missionaries would go overseas and one of their first lessons for the natives was how to wear 18th century clothing. And as soon as the native in foreign lands were wearing British attire, they were considered to be civilized and ready to become Christians. The result of that method was a lack of growth. They were not indigenous churches. The lesson is that we need different kinds of churches reaching different kinds of people.

- **New Churches Win More People.**

- We’ve already talked about the fact that evangelism is the soil in which new churches grow. They must win people to become a church.

- **New Churches Develop New Leadership.**

- In a new church, after a time of growth and testing, new believers can rise into leadership. In an older established church, it may take years before people are invited to participate in leadership responsibilities.

- **New Churches Encourage Established Churches.**

- A new church plant will often challenge established churches to re-examine their methods to see if there might be a more effective approach. The example of the new congregation will often encourage traditional churches to think outside of the box to consider new strategies.

- **New Churches Reach Needy Areas.**

- In transitional areas where older churches have moved away, new churches can find success where the old church was ineffective.

- **Proximity Enhances Discipleship.**

New churches located in the community are more effective in discipleship than those located far away. A neighborhood church generally leads to a greater degree of commitment to personal growth and spiritual development.

Murray wants us to consider the following objections more carefully...¹⁶

- Stuart Murray wrote *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* and included some objections as below.

Objection 1:

“There are enough churches already. We should concentrate on improving existing churches rather than planting new churches.”

⊕ **Enough Churches?**

- **Many churches are needed.**

- Responses:

"The still large number of existing churches, the continuing experience of declining atten-

dance and church membership, and the harsh realities of life in a post-Christian culture, all lend weight to (this) argument..."¹¹ In other words, if your local church isn't gaining much ground it is difficult to get excited about planning a new church somewhere else that may drain resources and manpower.

However many churches are needed, "It should be candidly acknowledged that current initiatives to plant thousands of new churches are ill-conceived unless these are accompanied by a significant reversal of the decades of decline... There is no empirical evidence to support such an expectation at present."¹²

Statistics show that if a denomination doesn't plant 3% new churches per year that denomination will lose ground. 3% is a minimum that must be attained if they are going to simply maintain their size.¹³ So we know that church planting is critical. But the reality is that we must at the same time improve and encourage established churches. It is a "both-and" proposition, church planting and church strengthening.

- **Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many years.**
 - Planting more of these churches is not a mission strategy worth pursuing. But planting new kinds of churches may be a key to effective mission and a catalyst for the renewal of existing churches."¹⁴ Again, marrying an unchanging theology with a flexible methodology can lead to the encouragement and growth of established churches.

But the sad reality is that many of these established churches are not interested in change and resist change. You'll hear arguments against change: "We never did it that way before! It was good enough for my parents, and my grandparents, and my great-grandparents and it's good enough for us!" Will Rogers said, "No one likes change except for a baby with a wet diaper!" So churches that don't want change can't be changed. But there are some who will read the handwriting on the wall and open up to a more pragmatic approach. So as we plant new churches, we must simultaneously strengthen existing churches.

Objection 2:

"Church planting weakens the mission and ministry of the churches by dividing their resources and minimizing their impact."

⊕ Weakens the churches?

- **Much church planting is taking place in areas where churches are already doing well.**
 - The impact on other parts of society where the church is weak is minimal, perhaps even counterproductive. This may have the unintended consequence of hindering the mission of the church where it is regarded already as an alien institution.¹⁵ It is a strange reality that the majority of church planters tend to be “called” to affluent, middle-class suburbs. The question is, are all of these church planters really listening to God? God may actually be calling some church planters to changing ethnic neighborhoods or declining blue-collar neighborhoods. There are thousands of smaller rural communities across the nation where congregations are simply guarding the traditions of the past rather than sharing the Gospel using new and innovative, God-anointed methods. This may be where God is actually calling these church planters.

- **New ethnic churches are an exception.**
 - But it is not yet certain that these churches will penetrate other communities. The "white man's religion" may soon be regarded as the preserve of African and Caribbean communities, alienating others.¹⁶

- **Resources are divided although this may enhance the impact of the churches.**
 - It is a move toward becoming the "whole people of God."

- **The objection, as it stands, is overstated and untenable.**
 - Planting new churches often results in a release of energy and multiplication of ministry." "But the objection... invites consideration of the models of church planting being employed, the importance of preparation and training, the balance between internal activity and mission beyond the church, and the very significant demands on those involved in church planting."¹⁷

So there needs to be a variety of models and methods so that new church plants aren't overlapping and weakening each other. Planting two program-driven churches in the same area they may actually weaken each other. Planting two Purpose-Driven churches in one location

may actually weaken them. By using different models, two new church plants in one area can actually strengthen each other.

Objection 3:

“Church planting has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end. It has distorted the biblical understanding of the mission of the church.”

⊕ An end in itself?

- **Fears that advocates of church planting want this to dominate.**
 - "There are fears within some sections of the church that advocates of church planting want this subject to dominate the agenda. Church planting, it is argued, instead of being one means of fulfilling some aspects of the mission of the church, can acquire a status that is unwarranted and even unbiblical."¹⁸

The end of all that we work for is not church planting. The goal is the advancement of God's Kingdom. But when the total focus is on church planting, the focus is removed from God's Kingdom. And these churches simply become monuments to themselves. Andy Crouch wrote an article for Christianity Today that illustrates this confusion between the end and the means of church planting:

“Part of my job involves attending numerous conferences on ministry. . . . At a recent distressed-jeans, multiple-piercings forum, I'm talking with a 25-year-old pastor who appears to drive up the average hairstyling bill in the room by several dollars. "Yeah," he says, "we're starting a church for cool people." Cool people? "Yeah, you know, people like us." (He doesn't mean himself and me; he means himself and his friends—all of whom do indeed exude a level of coolness that I could only dream about.) . . . The more I think about my conversation with that leader of the church for cool people, the more I worry that he was missing something. Cool is the temperature of the morgue. It is the absence of blood, of heat, of breath. Cool is not the word to describe a man in agony in a garden, his sweat like drops of blood on the ground. It is not the word for a son's free submission to his father's will, nor for his lonely cry to that father, nor for nakedness and passion and forgiveness. And it is not the word for a breakfast of fish on a beach, for speaking a woman's name, for life. To be sure, everyone needs a church, even cool people. I just hope they find out that another became cool so we wouldn't have to.”¹⁹

The goal is not simply church planting. The goal is the Kingdom of God and planting churches that give Him glory, honor, and praise! If it reaches cool people, that's great. But to do Kingdom work it must also reach un-cool people.

- **"Church planting operates well when the focus is not on planting new churches per se but on fulfilling the mission of the church or, better still, participating in the mission of God."²⁰**
 - "Setting church planting initiatives within the framework of a strategic discussion of mission is vital."

"In some recent church planting literature, the scope and level of theological discussion and engagement with biblical teaching has been disappointing. Responding to the objection we are considering here requires advocates of church planting to move beyond selected proof texts and develop a hermeneutically responsible and theologically coherent framework for the practice they are advocating."²¹

Murray may sound at times as if he is anti-church planting. In fact, he is himself a church planter and a strong advocate. He just wants us to think – and think clearly – about the question:

- **How does church planting fit into the total context of the Great Commission?**

Answering objections to church starting: ²²

- The objections to church planting as a primary focus are often less well-put and more selfish. In *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, Getz and Wall seek to answer these objections:

⊕ **"Hurts the Home Church."**

- **Any sponsoring church that emphasizes church starting reaps the rewards.**
 - An outward and evangelistic focus comes with a reproductive DNA. It is a fact that there is an initial drain to the mother church. But in the long-run it actually strengthens the mother church as they participate in the birth of new congregations and see the hand of God moving

through them.

⊕ “Costs Too Much.”

- **Several sponsorship methods are available.**
 - These can help any church become a part of starting new churches.

Video – Kevin Sullivan commenting on Sponsor Church help.

There are many different models being used in church planting today. Sometimes a sponsoring church can support a pastor or even an entire pastoral team to go out and plant a church. A layperson who senses God’s call may come under the umbrella of an established church and her pastor to go out and plant in a multi-housing community or in a home. Sponsorship models may or may not involve funding. But churches with a keen Great Commission vision will often supply financial needs for the sponsorship of new churches.

⊕ “Loses Too Many People.”

- **Not all methods of church starting require an infusion of people and talent from the sponsoring church.**
 - When it does, the sponsoring pastor will often find that they are replaced by others whose spiritual gifts may have lain dormant. Woodstock Baptist Church in Woodstock Georgia sent out a part of their congregation to be involved in a new church plant. They reported that the Sunday on which the new church started turned out to be a high-attendance day for them as God brought new people into their mother church. It reveals a problem with priorities when we are more concerned with the growth of our own church over and above the Kingdom of God.

⊕ “Too Many Needs Already.”

- **A biblical, great commission mindset may be needed!**
 - Some may object to church starting because they view the time and energy needed to start a new church as excessive.

⊕ **“Shouldn't Force a New Church.”**

- **Most unreached people are not knocking on the church's door!**

- We do not find them waiting to hear the gospel. We should not wait until interested Christians approach us about starting a new church in an unreached area. Jesus said, “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.” [Luke 14:23 NKJV] Those are strong words from the Lord. The word “compel” involves an impassioned effort to reach the lost.

Video: People aren't rejecting Jesus. It's the church culture they are rejecting.

⊕ **“Impedes Home Church's Growth.”**

- **New churches should not be seen as competition, but rather as fulfillment of kingdom growth.**

- Two churches may be geographically side-by-side and not work against each other – they simply may be responding and reaching different sociocultural groups from within the larger community.

⊕ **“Cannot Protect Sound Doctrine.”**

- **Slight deviations of practice and norms are not always bad.**

- Slight deviations from the stated norms and practices are not always crucial – (or bad) – in fact these alterations might even become helpful both to the new church and the more established congregations. The alternatives might be more culturally appropriate than those of the sponsoring group. Church planting is normally involving new methods applying what Jesus taught in using new wine skins with new wine. The message must never change, but methodologies must. It's what Paul was getting at in 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

⊕ **“Creates Competition.”²³**

- **Schaller states "Contrary to conventional wisdom, congregations usually benefit from intradenominational competition."²⁴**
 - That is, both grow, and disaffected members can leave the church without leaving the denomination.

⊕ **“New Testament: One Church in One City.”**

- There are two flaws in this argument:
 - **There is no clear teaching that there should only be one church/city.**
 - **The churches mentioned were not today’s typical institutions.**
 - (with buildings, staffs, and programs)
 - **The house church was the most prevalent congregational method of that day.**
 - We don’t see the church building actually emerging until a century later. The argument of one church in one city is not defensible from Scripture.

⊕ **“Will Not Enhance My Career Path.”**

- **Their ultimate goal should be to please God and not their peers.**
 - Some pastors of growing congregations feel that starting new congregations will not enhance their image in the eyes of their denomination. Pastors who hold such views are nearsighted—their ultimate goal should be to please God and not their peers. Actually, pastors who are able to multiply their church through church planting are viewed by ministry leaders as some of the elite pastors. They’re actually doing what happened in Acts and what Paul instructed to be done in 2 Timothy 2:2—something most never rival in their ministry experiences.

Until our ultimate goal is to please God and not our peers, it will hinder a church planting movement because our thinking is messed up. Pastors must get past the place where they simply compare attendance figures from the previous Sunday to the place where they are thinking and strategizing, and providing training and opportunities for members (and more members) to be participating in ministries and practicing mission efforts of evangelism (even

starting new churches). A church must not be measured by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity.

Our discussions should lay the hermeneutical and philosophical foundations for investing in church planting. We will examine the Bible, missiology, and the history of church planting.

- Video: Ken talking about focusing on God as we plant churches.

So the ultimate objective of church planting must be the glory and honor of God. For the moment, however, let's discuss what we have already considered and ask . . .

⊕ What is YOUR view of Church Planting?

- Are your motives only for the glory and honor of God?

