

**TOWARD A  
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY  
OF  
CHURCH  
MULTIPLICATION**

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# Toward a Biblical Theology of Church Multiplication<sup>1</sup>

Starting new churches is a commendable work which many churches promote around the world, mainly through the work of their missionaries. But a question that often goes unasked naturally emerges out of this work. Shouldn't these churches that so vigorously promote the planting of new churches around the planet also initiate churches in their same area? Shouldn't we have just as much zeal for multiplying congregations "at home" as we do in other countries? Why not plant a new church in our own city, even in our own part of the city?

**Shouldn't we have just as much zeal for multiplying congregations "at home" as we do in other countries?**

It strikes me that in their most basic forms there are really only three possible responses to these questions.

## ***Response #1: It is a nice idea among many other nice ideas.***

Someone who responds like this might say: "It is merely one of many ways that a church can be faithful to the Great Commission. It is something we rejoice in when we see it happen, but we are just as faithful to our Lord's final command if we begin a once-a-month 'seeker' outreach, for example."

## ***Response #2: It is a bad idea.***

Those who answer like this might think: "It will drain away energy, personnel and resources from a church that already has a hard enough time trying to keep all of its programs going. Giving our best people to the establishment and maintenance of a daughter church could set our own church back years in its efforts to grow and win our city for Christ!"

## ***Response #3: It is a necessary idea.***

Someone who offers this response might argue: "It not only has biblical backing, but also, if done wisely, it probably represents the single best way we can be faithful to the Lord's command to make disciples not only among the nations, but also at home. The multiplication of congregations is the key to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It is not simply another idea among many. It is the strategy by which all other strategies should be judged and to which all other strategies must eventually contribute."

It is my conviction that Response #3 best fits the biblical evidence. Why? Let me share three basic reasons:

***A Theological Reason:  
Local churches  
are essential to kingdom life.***

So that we take nothing for granted, we should first ask why churches are important.

***1. Believers need fellowship***

Perhaps this first answer is obvious. Fellowship is an essential ingredient of the Christian life. The scriptures specifically disapprove of individualized Christianity. For example, we find admonitions such as the one found in Hebrews 10:25, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Moreover, being together is necessary if we are to fulfill our obligations to each other, such as “spurring one another on toward love and good deeds” (v. 24).

***2. The new life is communal***

Isolated Christianity does not match the communal reality of the new life. In regeneration, Christ “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Colossians 1:13). The very concept of a kingdom is social. Individual believers in isolation cannot fully reflect this social reality. How on earth is the kingdom to be made manifest fully without community? It cannot be done. Consider further all of the New Testament imagery for the Christian life. It too is communal. Believers are part of a body (I Corinthians 12:12-31). They are members of a household (Ephesians 2:19, I Timothy 3:15). They are stones in a building (I Peter 2:5). The church is described in the same terms as ancient Israel – it is “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (I Peter 2:9). These are corporate descriptions. Therefore, to live the Christian life in isolation is to live in a state of self-deception. You cannot have the gospel without the community born of that gospel. Howard Snyder has summed this up with irresistible logic in stating that “If the Church is the body of Christ... then the Church is an indispensable part of the Gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***3. Local churches incarnate Christ uniquely***

When God wanted to give his final Word to humankind he sent his Son (Hebrews 1:12). In his coming, that “Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). The second person of the Trinity literally “pitched his tent” among us. There is a sense of rootedness and permanence to the divine visitation.

In a similar way, a church localizes and roots the presence of God in a community. Steve Spaulding has noted that “a church, as opposed to most of our non-churchly efforts, is a visible, permanent outpost of the kingdom. Jesus does not visit. He is not hit-and-run. He comes to stay; to be lived out; to be accessible, touched, seen, heard, understood.”<sup>3</sup> A church incarnates Christ in a community. Paul informs the Corinthians that “they” (plural, as a group) are the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:27), that “they” (plural, as a group) are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16-17, see also Ephesians 2:21-22). God is present in his people, and through them is present in their community. “Jesus Christ, while promising to indwell the individual believer, does not find full expression in a ‘body’ without ‘The Body’ of Christ, the corporate gathering of believers, the church, his bride, visible, accessible, with all of the gifts of the Spirit in operation.”<sup>4</sup>

**A church localizes and roots the presence of God in a community.**

This is a powerful witness. Just as the Word made flesh allowed humanity to “see” God’s glory (John 1:14), so a local congregation makes Christ visible. Lesslie Newbigin affirms this point when he asks and then answers the following question: “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***4. The gifts find their most strategic expression in a church***

In our tendency to think horizontally about the expansion of the Church, we must not forget that it is the Holy Spirit who equips and empowers the Church for this task. Consequently, it is only logical that if kingdom communities are essential to kingdom life we should find grace given to the church for its maintenance, growth and reproduction.

If we consider the various spiritual gifts given to the church (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4), we find gifts for edifying the saints (prophet, pastor, teacher, leadership), gifts for ministering to the saints and the outside community (service, encouragement, giving, mercy, etc.), and gifts for outreach (apostle, evangelist). These gifts all highlight the importance of community to

kingdom life. Moreover, they highlight the fact that these communities are not only to be strong, but also serving, growing and reproducing. All of the gifts are necessary (hence every believer is necessary) to the total mission of a church. Howard Snyder has written, “Not only the gift of evangelist [and apostle], however, but all spiritual gifts are relevant for evangelism in one way or another,” because the “overall functioning of the Christian community is itself a demonstration of the truth of the Gospel and thus a witness in and to the world.”<sup>6</sup> The result is a charismatically endowed organism that grows and reproduces naturally.

In addition to these theological reasons related to the very nature of the church, the scriptures give us other reasons for starting kingdom communities. We turn now to a consideration of the history of the founding of the early church.

***A Strategic Reason:  
Fulfilling the Great Commission  
requires premeditated church planting.***

***Paul: not just an evangelist – a church planter***

The book of Acts records the growth of the early church following the ascension of the Lord Jesus into heaven. In the process of recording that growth, Luke primarily narrates the story of Paul.<sup>7</sup> I personally believe that this fact is highly significant. The Holy Spirit could have recorded other events in the life of the early church. He could have inspired several writers to give accounts of the expansion of the early church. But he did not. He led Luke to record that account, and he led Luke to do so in a highly selective manner that gave preeminence to the ministry of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Why? I believe it is because he wanted the church to learn from Paul’s example.<sup>8</sup>

What becomes immediately apparent in studying the ministry of Paul is that *Paul did not primarily view his task as winning souls, but as starting churches*. D. J. Tidball writes, “Paul’s primary interest was not in the conversion of individuals but in the formation of Christian communities. In a large city, such as Rome or Corinth, several communities may well have been brought into existence, each based on a different household.”<sup>9</sup> Paul Bowers has written extensively on this subject.

Paul certainly considers his task to be evangelic, but it would be a

substantial distortion of the shape of his vocational task as he understood it and practiced it to represent his mission therefore as simply evangelistic, the seeking of converts. The vocation of evangelic proclamation was for Paul a larger complex than evangelism. For him it was a mission that embraced evangelism within an ecclesiological intention.<sup>10</sup>

We may go even further and insist that Paul only considered an area “evangelized” if believers had been “congregationalized.” At the end of his article entitled “Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission,” from which the previous quotation was taken, Bowers concludes, “What lies, in effect, within the compass of Paul’s familiar formula ‘proclaiming the gospel’ is, I suggest, not simply an initial preaching mission but the full sequence of activities resulting in settled churches.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***The Pauline Cycle***

This “full sequence of activities” is, of course, what David Hesselgrave has tried to capture in his now famous “Pauline Cycle.” Hesselgrave has gathered together the data on Paul’s ministry and organized it into a discernable pattern of ten steps:

- (1) Missionaries Commissioned -- Acts 13:1-4; 15:39-40.
- (2) Audience Contacted -- Acts 13:14-16; 14:1; 16:13-15.
- (3) Gospel Communicated -- Acts 13:17ff.; 16:31.
- (4) Hearers Converted -- Acts 13:48; 16:14, 15.
- (5) Believers Congregated -- Acts 13:43.
- (6) Faith Confirmed -- Acts 14:21, 22; 15:41.
- (7) Leadership Consecrated -- Acts 14:23.
- (8) Believers Commended -- Acts 14:23; 16:40.
- (9) Relationships Continued -- Acts 15:36; 18:23.
- (10) Sending Churches Convened -- Acts 14:26, 27; 15:1-4.<sup>12</sup>

For Paul, faithfulness to the Great Commission meant more than preaching evangelistic messages here and there. It meant completing a sequence of activities that would result in mature churches. We could say without overstating the case that, for Paul, to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) *required* planting churches.<sup>13</sup>

That Paul’s method is what the Holy Spirit

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chose to endorse with enscripturation is all the more significant when we consider that there were other models of religious propagation around in the first century.

That Paul in his mission did bring communities into existence is a commonplace, and yet it is a commonplace of not inconsiderable import for any attempt to grasp Paul's concept of his missionary task. Not all religious propaganda is directed at converting, nor by any means is all converting intended to issue in the generation of communities. One may compare the intentions, for example, of the Jewish proselyte movement of Paul's own background, or the intentions of the Hellenistic wandering preachers of his day. Both groups were concerned in some sense with conversions, but neither was directly concerned with founding new communities.<sup>14</sup>

Paul's method was not the cultural pattern of the day. It was a method born of the very character of the message he preached.

For Paul, however, conversion meant incorporation. Baptism is baptism into the body of Christ. The new believer implicitly becomes a believer-in-community, and Paul is concerned in his mission not only with the emergence of such believers but also with the emergence of such communities, for only in such a setting could that which is offered in the proclamation be properly realized and experienced.<sup>15</sup>

José María Martínez reminds us that "It should never be forgotten that what the Great Commission requires of us is not the making of 'converts' but 'disciples', and that this ministry includes teaching 'all things' commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19-20)".<sup>16</sup> An adequate response to such a comprehensive commission can only be made if it includes the formation of communities where the total implications of the gospel can be taught and lived.

Kingdom life must be lived in kingdom communities. Paul knew this and planted churches. The Holy Spirit wanted the church throughout history to know this, and so he led Luke to record Paul's method. The premeditated planting of new churches is a strategic priority with divine approval. And this priority has an implication.

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***An Implicit Reason:  
The New Testament model assumes  
the multiplication of the churches planted.***

***The role of Pauline churches***

We would do the genius of the apostle's method injustice if we simply concluded from his approach that gifted individuals ought to be involved in church planting efforts. Paul's strategy undoubtedly went beyond his own personal efforts and those of his team to include the churches he founded. Paul expected these churches to continue the church planting effort, so that out of the churches he founded others might multiply.

Roland Allen believed that

St. Paul's theory of evangelizing a province was not to preach in every place in it himself, but to establish centers of Christian life in two or three important places *from which the knowledge might spread into the country round*. This is important, not as showing that he preferred to preach in a capital rather than in a provincial town or in a village, *but because he intended his congregation to become at once a centre of light* (emphasis mine).<sup>17</sup>

Roger Hedlund agrees with this assessment: "The heart of Paul's strategy was the church... Paul's ministry resulted in churches. He left behind congregations equipped to care for their own needs *and to join him in missionary outreach as well*" (emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup> In fact, Hedlund states that, "Hay believes that Paul spent fifteen out of thirty-five years ministering in five strategic congregations in five countries. *These churches were able to carry on the apostolate in their region*" (emphasis mine).<sup>19</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher likewise believes that this was Paul's intention. "The missionary strategy and vision of Paul was to start churches in the bigger cities of regions and among peoples which did not have any church *and to pass on the task to reach everybody within the region to the new churches while moving on to new regions*" (emphasis mine).<sup>20</sup>

Paul expected the churches to carry on his mission of planting churches. This is obviously part of the reason he can write to the Romans, "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions..." (Romans 15:23). Paul had not shared the gospel with every individual between Jerusalem and Illyricum (Romans 15:19). He had not even planted a church in each of the towns and cities in these regions. Can we possibly believe that the man who understood that God "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I

Timothy 2:4) would be satisfied with simply seeing a handful of people come to saving faith in each of these areas? Impossible! Nevertheless, he could operate as he did precisely because he believed this was the best way of reaching as many people as possible.

That Paul devoted so much of his time to establishing the churches he had planted makes all the more sense if we understand that he was preparing them to continue the mission locally. It is plain from several texts that the Apostle intended to so instruct his converts that a reproduceable chain reaction of ministry would be initiated. He writes to Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (II Timothy 2:2)<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, elsewhere it becomes plain that the scope of this instruction was vast. When Paul addressed the Ephesian elders on the beach of Miletus, he reminds them that during the three years of his ministry among them, “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). Seven verses later he states that “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (20:27). It is for this reason that in the previous verse he can claim that “I am innocent of the blood of all men” (20:26). Paul had paid his debt to all people because he had so thoroughly instructed a group of people that they could instruct others who would, in turn, instruct others as local churches multiplied.<sup>22</sup> He had initiated a process by which everyone in the area could be evangelized and discipled.

Furthermore, as we study the New Testament documents it becomes clear that not only was this Paul’s expectation, but in several places we discover that this expectation was met. Thus Paul could write to the church in Thessalonica, “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere” (I Thessalonians 1:8). Certain individuals in these churches apparently identified themselves very closely with that expectation. Epaphras started the church in Colosse (Colossians 1:7), and someone other than Paul planted the church in Laodicea (Colossians 2:1).

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– Paul Bowers

### ***Four Walls and a Roof***

Still, we may bear the haunting sense that if Paul really expected the

churches he started to start other churches we would find more in his writings that states this specifically. My guess is that the reason we don't find many direct statements of this nature is that *Paul didn't need to say it*. It was an assumed expectation. More than that, *such church multiplication occurred naturally*.

Sociologist Derek Tidball notes that “archeological evidence, as reported by J. Murphy-O'Connor, confirms that the average household could have only accommodated fifty (a realistic starting figure for the Christians we can actually identify with the church in Corinth) with difficulty. It is more probable than that they would have met more regularly as subgroups in smaller numbers.”<sup>23</sup> Tidball adds, “The household was ready-made to serve as the ‘basic cell’ of the church and the primary unit for mission as it used its existing network of relationships outside its own membership to spread the gospel.”<sup>24</sup> Church history bears this assessment out.

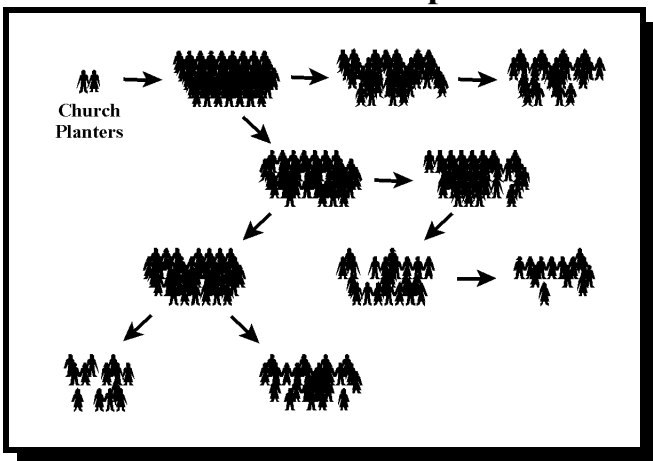
We know that converts in many cities quickly ran into the thousands; yet for nearly two hundred years no church buildings were erected. Such growth under such conditions can be explained only as the multiplication of small congregations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the New Testament often refers to “the church in your (or their) house.”<sup>25</sup>

This being the case, the growth of the early church was vastly aided by a natural phenomenon – four walls and a ceiling. When a church reached a certain limit it naturally divided. Thus, perhaps without people even thinking about it, the pattern developed – grow and divide, grow and divide, grow and divide. The assumed nature of this pattern may explain, in part, the almost distressing absence of specific directives to multiply congregations – it happened naturally!

Why talk about what everybody takes for granted? Epistles were largely written to make clear what people were confused about, not to elucidate matters that needed no clarification.

Too often today we grow exclusively by expanding the four walls. Certainly we have possibilities for growing larger in a way that most early churches did not (at least in countries with religious freedom and a strong economy). Unfortunately, because the walls of our churches are

### House Church Multiplication



“elastic,” we have almost lost the principle of multiplication. If we grow, we do so simply by adding members to an ever-larger church in an ever-expanding building. We seldom reproduce. Thus we have lost half of the mathematical formula for developing a dynamic church movement. We only add, we don’t multiply.

### *Normative today?*

In spite of the basis from which I have just argued, I do not believe we need to slavishly reproduce the house church pattern. In many areas of the world our cultural dynamics are different and permit multiple options. For that matter, the case for the normativeness of house churches is lessened because it was a cultural phenomenon that was not exclusively utilized even back then. The church seems to have met often wherever was most advantageous. In Jerusalem it met in the temple courts and in homes (Acts 2:46). In Ephesus it met in a rented hall (Acts 19:9). However, the house church model still has much to commend it.<sup>26</sup> Howard Snyder makes the following observation:

**The growth of the early church was vastly aided by a natural phenomenon – four walls and a ceiling.**

The optimum size of local congregations will vary according to cultural factors, and no arbitrary limit can be set. Church growth research would seem to suggest, however, that once a congregation has grown to a few hundred members the rate of growth will slow down unless new branch congregations are formed through growth-by-division. Where notable exceptions to this pattern are found, closer examination will usually reveal that the local “congregation” running into the thousands is in reality a whole congeries of smaller “sub-congregations” in which growth-by-division is taking place as the normal pattern.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, whether we plant house churches or other types of churches, we should keep the growth and multiplication principles. The tough question becomes, “What will serve as our four walls?” What will force us to reproduce? The answer in many situations (since there is no compelling built-in need) will simply be a *willful determination* to reproduce. However, in most circumstances, there will be natural times when reproduction can take place. Instead of adding another service to the Sunday morning schedule, a church could start another church. Instead of moving to a new location when the present site becomes too small, a church could begin another church.

When the possibilities get this specific, a church will need to wrestle with the options under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It may cost more money to

plant a new church than to add another service. Perhaps there is a firm sense that larger churches with more and better programs have a unique advantage in reaching certain populations. Perhaps there is the fear of losing good leadership to the church plant and slowing the growth of the mother church. In the face of such concerns, research from various sources brings us several perspectives worth considering.

**“Mother” churches grow better than “sterile” churches.**

The first perspective comes from England. In preparation for Challenge 2000, a national saturation church planting plan, research was conducted on 350 churches. “The survey showed that the 55 churches which had given birth to a new church had grown on average 31.5 percent between 1990 and 1994. ...The non-planting churches grew on average 19.6 percent in the same period.”<sup>28</sup> This is a significant statistical difference, and ought to encourage the timid. Churches which begin other churches tend to grow faster themselves.<sup>29</sup>

**New churches grow better than old churches.**

Research conducted in the United States highlights how detrimental it can be to the progress of the gospel to maintain old churches *at the expense of* starting new churches. According to Bruce McNicol, among the Evangelical churches studied, those less than 3 years old gained 10 persons to Christ per year for every 100 members. Churches from 3 to 15 years old gained 5 per year for every 100. And when a church had surpassed the 15 year mark, it’s average dropped to 3 per year for every 100.<sup>30</sup>

However, this data, rather than leading “older” churches to despair, ought to serve as a stimulus to surpass this natural decline by means of passing on its life to a daughter church. If instead of one church that was 20 years old there was a 20-year-old mother church and a 2-year-old daughter church, it is conceivable that the combined potential of the two congregations would reach 7.5 conversions per year for every 100 members. (3 for every 100 + 10 for every 100 / 2). Following this pattern, a 75-year-old church, for example, might have an evangelistic impact far greater than what might be anticipated from its age (especially if we consider that its daughter churches, in turn, would also be multiplying themselves).

**Smaller churches grow better than larger churches.**

The third perspective we shall mention comes from research carried out from Germany, in what turned out to be the largest study ever conducted on the growth of local churches on a global scale. Over one thousand churches participated in 32 countries. And although we could mention many facts from this study,<sup>31</sup> we will limit ourselves to one that has special relevance in this

context: In general, the larger the church, the worse it grew.

In a day when the megachurch seems to be the model and ambition of any church with vision, this bit of information comes as a healthy word of caution. To be specific, “mini-churches” (less than 100 members) had a growth potential 16 times greater per member than “mega-churches” (over 2000 members). This same tendency could be seen at every size level (100-member churches had a greater growth potential than 200-member churches; 200 greater than 300; and so forth).<sup>32</sup> These results were so impressive to the author, Christian A. Schwarz, that he writes the following in his second book on the subject: “Churches with 1000 or more in attendance are the exceptions. By contrast, the rule should be churches of about 100 to 200 attendees who continuously help new churches to be born. This is demonstrably the most effective contribution a church can make to world evangelization.”<sup>33</sup>

Studies such as these confirm at an empirical level the logic we see in the pages of the New Testament. An ecclesiology of multiplication is essential to carry out the Great Commission faithfully. Obviously we could highlight other characteristics of the early church that were important to its explosive growth, but the phenomenon of multiplication certainly explains a great deal of the impact it had in the first few centuries.

**The rule should be churches of about 100 to 200 attendees who continuously help new churches to be born. This is demonstrably the most effective contribution a church can make to world evangelization.**

At this point there is one more issue to consider. It is possible that a church understands the importance of starting local churches, but does not consider itself to be the best entity to carry out such a project.

## *An Inescapable Responsibility*

### *Mission and apostolic local churches*

Melvin Hodges has written: “The church is God’s agent in the earth – the medium through which he expresses himself to the world. God has no other redeeming agency in the earth.”<sup>34</sup> Not only was the church given the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 15:16, Luke 24:47-48, John 20:21, Acts 1:8), but since the church is the body of Christ, it is the vehicle through which its Head accomplishes its purposes on earth (Ephesians 3:10). As the body of Christ in their given localities, local churches naturally share with each other the responsibilities given to the entire church.

One fact that surfaces during the initial expansion of the church is the number of times that the church in Jerusalem had duly appointed representatives verify the work of the Holy Spirit in initiating a new phase of the Christian mission. When Philip took the Gospel to Samaria, the Apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to look in on the situation (Acts 8:14). When Peter was used to bring salvation to Cornelius and those in his house, the believers in Jerusalem asked for an accounting (Acts 11:1-4). When some men from Cyprus and Cyrene took the gospel to Antioch and news of this “reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem,” they sent Barnabas (Acts 11:22).

Whatever other dynamics were at work in these situations, we can at least conclude that the church that existed sensed responsibility for the church that was coming into being. It was to those who first believed, after all, that the commission had been entrusted. This sense of responsibility worked both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the Jerusalem church appointed certain people to represent its interests in other places. On the other hand, it did not hesitate to condemn those who went out without their authorization and preached a false gospel (Acts 15:24).

Some might insist that this situation is unique (and therefore without relevance for us today) because it was the Apostles who directed this activity in the one-time, unrepeatable, first expansion of the Church. What I find fascinating, however, is the progression of terms used in the above mentioned passages. In Acts 8:14, it is “*the apostles*” who sent Peter and John. In Acts 11:1 it is “*the apostles and the brothers throughout Judea*” who heard that Gentiles had received the word of God, and it is to “*them*” that Peter explains his actions. Then, in Acts 11:22, news of the great turning to Christ of Gentiles in Antioch “*reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem.*” Increasingly, the commission physically given to the Apostles by our Lord became the property of the church, and in this case a specific local church – the church at Jerusalem.

In a similar manner, once the church in Antioch had been established, it became a custodian of the advancing mission of the church. While the Holy Spirit indicated that he wanted Paul and Barnabas set apart for ministry, it was the church that sent them out (Acts 13:2-3). Moreover, Paul and Barnabas sensed their responsibility to the sending body. When each of their journeys was over, they returned to report on their work (Acts 14:26-27, 18:18-22).<sup>35</sup>

Beyond these “sending” situations, it is repeatedly the plain expectation of the Apostle Paul that local churches bear a responsibility in the dissemination of the gospel throughout the world. Thus he tells the church at Rome that he hopes they will “assist” him on his journey to Spain (Romans 15:24). He thanks the Philippians for their “partnership in the gospel” (Philippians 1:4). Later in that same letter, while thanking the Philippians for their contribution to his work, Paul laments, “When I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me

in that matter of giving and receiving” (Philippians 4:15). If the expansion of the church were not the responsibility of these local congregations, Paul would have no legitimate grounds to expect such assistance.

### **Only “pioneer” church planting?**

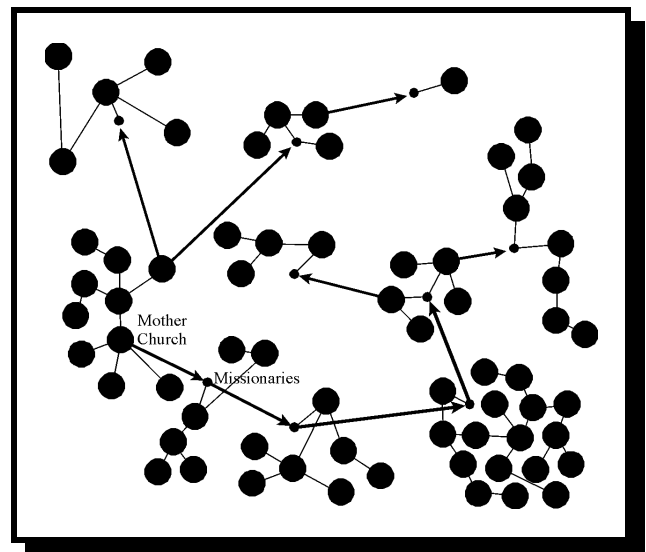
Many churches today understand this responsibility when it comes to sending out cross-cultural church planters. They understand it to be their mission to see that church movements are begun in areas where no such movement exists. Most would agree that we send missionaries, among other reasons, because it is simply impossible for a church to do the job directly when the geographic and cultural distances are great. If we cannot go, we send a representative to start churches. Why then, when the task is local, do we often fail to sense the same responsibility? The very task that we perceive to be important enough to send commissioned individuals at great cost to go *initiate* on our behalf halfway around the world in a different culture, we are often unwilling to *continue* at comparatively small cost in our own culture. Something is missing in this logic. If churches bear one responsibility, they bear the other as well. Our responsibility is to disciple the nations, and that *includes* our own! Moreover, it is a responsibility that can only be fully discharged by the multiplication of congregations.

At this point, some might suggest that just as we commission missionaries to carry out this work somewhere else on our behalf, so we might appoint someone else to do this work on our behalf locally. We could, for example, support our local denominational church planter. In other words, we can make use of para-church structures to fulfill our responsibility.

In this connection, Howard Snyder has made a distinction which I find pertinent. “While the church is God’s agent of evangelism, dynamic para-church structures can be man’s agent of evangelism, useful in God’s hands for the more rapid and effective propagation of the Gospel.”<sup>36</sup> The church is God’s agent; thus the church bears the responsibility of the task. How the church organizes

### **Local and Cross-Cultural Church Multiplication**

A mother church (like Antioch) begins a church planting chain reaction by multiplying in its own area and by sending out church planters (like Paul and Barnabas) to other areas that are geographically or culturally distant. (Small dots = missionaries. Large dots = churches)



itself to execute that responsibility is another question, however. Here, under the Spirit's guidance, there is room to adapt to the needs of the moment.

Having said this, it is still my conviction that we will most effectively achieve our objectives by reducing the number of intermediate entities we establish between the church doing mission and the church established by that mission. The truth of this is born out by the fact that most effective local church plants start with a sizeable church nucleus already (i.e., a church, though small) and grow from there.<sup>37</sup> In other words, "like" produces "like" best and most naturally. Why create unnecessary "unlikes" that must then go through a mutation phase before they become a "like" again? Where there are not exigencies which make the use of an intermediary necessary (such as distance and culture), it is best for a church to reproduce directly.

**The very task that we perceive to be important enough to send commissioned individuals at great cost to go *initiate* on our behalf halfway around the world in a different culture, we are often unwilling to *continue* at comparatively small cost in our own culture.**

### ***A challenge for the church***

Saturating the world with local churches is the absolutely critical means of fulfilling our mandate. Fortunately, at the front end of the twenty-first century there are many who have come to the same conclusion.

Donald McGavran, the father of the modern church growth movement, toward the end of his life told Jim Montgomery, the founder of DAWN Ministries, "Don't call it 'church growth' anymore. Call it 'church multiplication!'" Two weeks before his death, he added, "The only way we will get the job of the Great Commission done is to plant a church in every community of the world."<sup>38</sup> If this were accomplished, every person would be within reach of a believing congregation that not only speaks that person's language, but also shares that person's culture.

David Hesslegrave, in writing on "The Heart of the Christian Mission," states:

*The primary mission of the Church and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches where they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service, thereby planting new congregations throughout the world. Of course there are many other important tasks to be carried out by Christian believers both individually and corporately. But few of these objectives will be realized unless new believers are being added to local churches, unless new local*

churches are being added to the Universal Church, and unless existing churches are growing up into the fullness of Him who is their Head.<sup>39</sup> (emphasis his).

It is for this reason that I find the new direction and energy provided to the church growth movement by the Natural Church Development emphasis so promising. It inseparably joins the health of a church with its growth and multiplication. It's not a question of pursuing a church's numerical growth as an objective apart from its spiritual maturity. And it's not a question of choosing between numerical growth and the multiplication of congregations. Viewed organically, health naturally leads to growth, and growth to reproduction. From the perspective of creation, we have rediscovered a value embedded in the pages of the New Testament: an ecclesiology of multiplication.

The potential problem for many churches is that because they have the financial capacity to "expand the walls" of their place of meeting, unlimited growth is all they pursue. In this way the natural division and multiplication that happened in the early church by virtue of space limitation is eliminated. It is possible to grow "infinitely" large, and as a result, it is easy to assume that our responsibility for the fulfillment of the Great Commission in our area is accomplished by simply adding more converts to our existing churches.

But the model of the New Testament is a model of reproduction, not merely of one believer reproducing through leading another believer to Christ, but of one church giving birth to another. This is a model which generates geometric growth, not merely arithmetic growth. The sad truth of large sectors of the evangelical movement is that we have settled, in far too many cases, for the success of more individuals added to our churches, instead of the success of saturating our nations with communities of faith where every man, woman and child can have easy access to the gospel of life.

**Viewed organically, health naturally leads to growth, and growth to reproduction. From the perspective of creation, we have rediscovered a value embedded in the pages of the New Testament: an ecclesiology of multiplication.**

Church multiplication isn't only a principle for missionaries in other parts of the world. It is a principle for every church in every people group of the world. It is a universally valid principle. It is a New Testament principle.

**Notes:**

1. Revised from the original version (1996) commissioned by Southern Gables Church, Littleton, CO.
2. Quoted in Roger Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 200.
3. Steve Spaulding, in unpublished notes taken at a DAWN International brainstorming session, February 7-10, 1995.
4. Ibid.
5. As quoted by Charles Van Engen in *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 32.
6. Howard Snyder, "The Church as God's Agent in Evangelism," *Let the Earth hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 335.
7. A simple content analysis of the book of Acts reveals that in 17 of the 28 chapters, Paul is the central character. Peter is central in 8, Stephen in 2, Philip in 1.
8. In using Paul's ministry as a starting point for a theology of church multiplication, I do not wish to suggest that we cannot learn from the ministry of others in the New Testament. Neither would it be proper to give the impression that Paul was the only one who engaged in the premeditated planting of new churches. Nevertheless, in terms of what we are actually presented with in the New Testament canon, Paul's philosophy of ministry is arguably the only one we are given with any degree of development. Furthermore, it is the only one we see proactively implemented.
9. Derek J. Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald Hawthorne, *et al*, editors (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1993), 885.
10. Paul Bowers, "Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30/2 (June 1987), 188.
11. Ibid. 198.
12. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 58.
13. See David F. Detwiler, "Paul's Approach to the Great Commission in Acts 14:21-23," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March, 1995), 33-41.
14. Bowers, "Fulfilling," 187.
15. Ibid.
16. José María Martínez, *La España evangélica ayer y hoy*, 476.
17. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 12-13.
18. Roger Hedlund, *Mission*, 218.
19. Ibid., 214.

20. Thomas Schirrmacher, "Romans as a Charter for World Mission." *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 10:4 (October, 1993, 161).

21. The fact that this verse (II Timothy 2:2) has become so popular as a *one-on-one* discipling "theme" verse in certain circles, is an evidence of how far we've digressed from Paul's ecclesiological intention.

22. This reading of Acts 20:26-27 first came to my attention from Roy Clements in a message given at Denver Seminary. Dr. Clements' precise words were, "The reason Paul could say he was innocent of the blood of all men was that he had planted a church."

23. Tidball, "Setting," 885.

24. *Ibid.*, 888.

25. Snyder, "Agent," 347.

26. See Bob Fitts, Sr., *Saturation Church Planting: Multiplying Congregations Through House Churches* (Laguna Beach: Outreach Fellowship, International), 1994. This short monograph makes a strong biblical case for the effectiveness of the house church model. It also draws upon a large number of texts that indicate the early church used this pattern extensively.

27. Snyder, "Agent," 332.

28. "Still 'Best Method Under Heaven,'" DAWN Report (August, 1995), 6.

29. Of course, as a mere statistic, this does not establish causality. In other words, it is possible that churches with a higher growth rate are more likely to reproduce, or that churches with a desire to reproduce are more likely to grow, or both! In any case, the correlation between growth and multiplication is fascinating.

30. "Churches Die with Dignity," *Christianity Today*, January 14, 1991, p. 69. Quoted in *Planting Growing Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Aubrey Malphurs p. 44.

31. For example, in general, smaller churches are healthier churches and have a higher percentage of members using their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church body. (Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46-48).

32. Christian A. Schwarz, *NCD*, 46-48. It is worth noting that the most fascinating result of the research project was the clear positive relationship between a church's health and its growth. But even in this area, (as mentioned in the previous note) smaller churches came out ahead, having a higher average level of health than the large churches. Obviously, this also contributed to their higher growth rates.

33. Christian A. Schwarz, *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, 40.

34. Quoted by Snyder, "Agent," 327.

35. It is reasonable to assume that Paul would have returned to Antioch after his third missionary journey had he not been arrested in Jerusalem and from there taken to Rome.

36. Snyder, "Agent," 342.

37. Aubrey Malphurs, in his book, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* speaks of two ways to conceive of this initial nucleus (“core group”). One possibility is a nucleus of believers recruited from the target area, and the other is a nucleus taken from a mother church. But whether this nucleus is of one variety or the other, Malphurs emphasizes the advantage of such a nucleus over against the “lone wolf” strategy (p. 319). See also, pages 299-316).

38. Fitts, *House*, 12.

39. Hessegrave, *Planting*, 20.

For more information on Natural Church Development,  
check the English area on the following web site:  
<http://www.bioiglesia.org>