

WHY PLANT CHURCHES?

By Dave Harvey

On September 17th, 1787, the US Constitution was signed. These signatures, however, did not finalize the adoption process. The Constitution still required ratification by at least nine of the thirteen states. But there were obstacles. How would this new government actually function? How would ordinary people really understand and contribute to the polity embodied in this groundbreaking document? In order to persuade the states to ratify and follow the Constitution, an exposition of its meaning and an application of its content was required.

Perceiving an historic opportunity, Alexander Hamilton — one of America's Founding Fathers — organized the production of *The Federalist Papers*: eighty-five articles and essays, written largely by Hamilton, to interpret the Constitution and help people understand how it should work within their new government.

With irrepressible prescience, Hamilton predicted the path. For the Constitution to be adopted, it must be understood. To be understood, portions required definition and explanation. Hamilton's instincts were accurate: *The Federalist Papers* provided the clarity necessary to galvanize the states and ratify the Constitution, and they remain a national treasure today.

While this paper could never assume the genius of Hamilton, it shares the intent behind his Federalist efforts.

As gospel-minded Christians, we must plant churches; this is our constitutional mandate; anything less represents willful disobedience. For church planting to be achieved, however, it must be understood. To be understood, it must be defined. To be defined, it must be clarified in writing.

We chalk a line at that place, then, and mark it as our starting point.

Defining Church Planting

Church planting means, quite simply, *sending planters to start new churches*.¹ While church planting may entail more — for example assessment, on-going training, funding, and strategic coaching — it is not less. By defining church planting in this way, however, we are not necessarily grounded in the biblical soil which makes this endeavor fruitful. To reap the best harvest, we must plow within a Scripture-rich field.

Scripturally driven church planting is:

1. Embedded in the Great Commission
2. Entrusted to partnerships
3. Executed by qualified pastor-planters
4. Catalyzed by funding
5. Contextualized to culture

Embedded in the Great Commission

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18–20)

The Great Commission starts with the glorious gospel, fastening the mission of God to the triumphant reign of Christ secured by his death and resurrection: “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v. 18). The reality of Christ’s authority forms the foundation for the mission of church planting. The Great Commission announces that the contract is inked, the rights are reserved, and the deal sealed: Christians can serve God’s warrant of good news to a broken world. We get the wild privilege of telling lost souls they are loved... *and wanted* by a risen Savior.

Church planting is not anchored by teams, techniques, technology, or binding territorial spirits.

Nor should church planting be the product of driven, disillusioned pastors, the fiends of fame, or as a quixotic quest of self-fulfillment. Rather, church planting is grounded in the explosive message embodied in Christ and entrusted to us in Matthew 28. The gospel is the one message that makes all the difference. Through church planting, we become God’s megaphone to the world.

¹ While churches may explore multi-site options by starting new congregations, a church plant as defined here happens when a congregation is formed becoming a separate legal entity (In the USA, this would involve becoming a 501c3 organization).

Some have objected to the use of the Great Commission as the foundation for the church's call to witness and multiply. Representing a brand of missional cessationism, these writers — primarily Protestant — think that Matthew 28 applies only to the original church founders, the Eleven.² But the Great Commission was entrusted, not just to the Eleven apostles who walked with Jesus, but to the Eleven as representatives of the church.³

Four specific pillars support this thesis about the Great Commission:

- **Pillar #1: The Commission is a command.** Granting for a moment that the apostles were commanded to teach Christ's followers "to observe all that I have commanded you" (v.20), then we can infer their instruction would include obedience to the Great Commission. If we deny this logic, the church should not teach everything nor baptize since these duties were given only to the apostles.⁴
- **Pillar #2: The Commission's scope.** "Make disciples of *all nations*" (emphasis mine). Is it possible that these Eleven men could circulate to "all nations"? The obvious and technical answer is 'not-by-a-longshot.' It's evident that other people — a lot of people — are in view here.
- **Pillar #3: The Commission's duration.** "To the end of the age." The Eleven may have been special, but they certainly weren't eternal. That means the "you" referenced in verses 20 and 21 refers to people beyond the Eleven. Christ is speaking to the Eleven *and* to the church lasting to the end of the age.
- **Pillar #4: The Commission's application.** If Acts and the remainder of the New Testament chronicle the early disciples' understanding and application of the Great Commission, local churches seem to emerge as the fruit, focus, and fuel of missions. Paul's missionary journeys are essentially church planting ventures. From Acts to Revelation, the missiology of the New Testament is primarily church based and church generated. We'll detail this more in the next section.

² "Several reasons for (the) general lack of foreign missions work by Protestants have been suggested. The worst, perhaps, was the argument offered by some of the magisterial reformers themselves, that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 applied only to the Apostles and thus that missions activity was no longer necessary for Christians" (Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch, ed., *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2008, 13).

³ "These missionary commissions are indeed given to the Twelve (or the Eleven). We need to note at the same time, however, that the authors of the Gospels, who provide an account of the ministry of Jesus for the local churches, see the entire church of the messianic people of God represented in the Twelve. This means that if the Twelve go their separate ways in fulfillment of Jesus' missionary directive, then the 'Great Commission' now applies to the local communities of followers of Jesus established by the ministry of the Twelve" (Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and The Early Church*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 56).

⁴ I'm grateful to Rob Plummer for making this point clear in his paper entitled, "The Great Commission in the New Testament."

To summarize, the apostles received the Great Commission (v. 16), but the church must finish it.⁵ “It was not merely given to the apostles for their ministry,” says John Piper, “but was given to the church for its ministry as long as this age lasts.”⁶ A Day has been appointed where Jesus will return to personally wrap up his mission. Until that glorious moment where the heavens rend and the clouds roll back, we are instructed to ‘hasten’ his coming by the fulfillment of the Great Commission.⁷

Entrusted to Partnerships

Growing up, my mom’s lasagna was a potent palette-pleaser among our clan. Mom always worked from a specific recipe, bequeathed from her mother and preserved through faint scribbling on a worn, crumpled, sauce-spattered, three-by-five card. The recipe specified the exact ingredients needed for the best results. Likewise, the Great Commission is the best recipe for responding to God with our mission efforts. As with any recipe, the right results spring from careful attention to the Commission’s ingredients.

The Great Commission resonates with initiative and momentum: *Go, make disciples, baptizing them, teaching them.* The epicenter of this passage lies in verse 19 where Jesus commanded, “make disciples.” As an imperative, the phrase conveys an authoritative direction or command. In fact, the Commission’s three participles — going, baptizing, and teaching — are all weighted with imperative force because of their semantic connection to this disciple-making command.⁸ Nothing here is optional. “Going” without “making disciples” is an aborted commission. “Baptizing” without “teaching” is birth without growth.

For the Commission to be great, we need all the ingredients.

The Church. Making disciples, baptizing, teaching. Where does that actually happen in the New Testament? In other words, what is the locus in Acts and the epistles where the Great Commission was uniquely embraced, embodied, and executed? The answer, of course, is the local church.⁹

⁵ “The command to witness to Christ is given to every member of his Church. It is a commission given to the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. When the Church recognizes that it exists for the world, there arises a passionate concern that the blessings of the Gospel of Christ should be brought to every land and to every man and woman” (Christopher J.H. Wright, quoting the Dutch theologian Adolph Visser’t Hooft in “Whole Gospel, Whole Church, Whole World,” *Christianity Today*, 2009).

⁶ John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 174.

⁷ Peter 3:8–13.

⁸ “After the initial statement concerning Jesus’ authority, which has the parallelism ‘ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς’ — ‘in heaven and on [the] earth’ (v 18b) — the commission proper consists syntactically of the main verb ‘πορευθέντες’ — ‘make disciples’ — with three parallel subordinate participles: μαθητεύσατε, ‘going,’ βαπτίζοντες, ‘baptizing,’ and διδάσκοντες, ‘teaching’ (vv. 19–20a). The participles when linked with the imperative verb themselves take on imperatival force and function as imperatives” (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33b, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn Barker, and Ralph P. Martin, Dallas: Word, 1995, 882).

⁹ “The primary historical significance of the Great Commission lies in the fact that it gives to the church the pattern and purpose of missions. It defines and delineates the missionary task. We have in the Great

Paul the missionary was sent by local churches and received into churches. His labors resulted in more churches and his letters were addressed to churches.¹⁰ The aim of missions is never to separate the work of missions from the church. The aim of missions is creating new local churches through the efforts of local churches.¹¹

This is why we must believe in church planting.

Church planting establishes a mission base for believers to replicate the Great Commission. Together, we send out planters and teams (“Go”) to reach the lost with the gospel (“baptizing”), build the local church (“making disciples and teaching them everything”), and finally we send out new planters and people into the world (“Go” once again, re-starting the cycle). We embody the heart of Christ’s command. We reach with the gospel; build up people as the church; and finally send them into the world as *gospelized* churches resulting in more local churches reproducing themselves.¹²

Commission a compass, a charter, and a plan” (George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, Chicago: Moody, 1972, 178).

¹⁰ “Proclaiming the gospel meant for Paul not simply an initial preaching or with it the reaping of converts; it included also a whole range of nurturing and strengthening activities which led to the firm establishment of congregations. So, his claim to have ‘fulfilled the gospel in an arc right up to Illyricum’ signified that he had established strong churches in strategic centers of this area, such as Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus” (Peter T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993, 43).

¹¹ “Paul not only proclaimed the gospel and, under God, converted men and women. He also founded churches as a necessary element in his missionary task. Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into him, and this membership within a Christian community. The apostle’s letters are addressed to such churches. Indeed, the existence of these congregations Paul regards as an authentication of his apostleship (1 Cor. 9:2; 2 Cor. 3:1–3). From his *practice* of residential missions (at Corinth and Ephesus) and nurture of churches (1 Thess. 2:10–12), from his *priorities* (1 Thess. 2:17–3:13; 2 Cor 2:12–13; 10:13–16), and from his *description of his assignment* (Col 1:24–27; Rom 1:1–15; 15:14–16) in relation to admonition and teaching believers to bring them to full maturity in Christ, it is clear that *the nurture of emerging churches* is understood by Paul to be ‘an integral feature of his missionary task.’” (O’Brien quoting W. P. Bowers in *Gospel and Mission*, 42).

¹² In Peters’ study of missiology in history, he laments the development of “the misconception that missions was the responsibility of individuals rather than the obligation of the churches. This erroneous idea, advocated by Zwingli and his successors, has only gradually and in part been overcome in recent decades. Zwingli maintained that missions is the business of specially called apostles and that the church as such has nothing to do with missions. This same idea carried over later into Pietism and became dominant in much of Western Protestantism. It still survives due to the inertness of many churches and their inability to organize effectively for missions on the one hand and the strong and vital individualism of some leaders on the other hand. ... Such development was most unfortunate and worked itself out negatively in at least three ways: First, it left many of the larger churches passive and uninvolved in missions. Second, it set up a trade-company type of missions administration and complex with the mission societies becoming autonomous agencies alongside autonomous church bodies, thus introducing a dichotomy on the home base. Third, it related the churches of the mission lands to a missionary society rather than to a mother or sister church of the sending countries. Thus, individuals have felt called to follow in the steps of the apostles and to pioneer for Christ in mission lands independently of the churches and church direction. As a result, many churches as such have remained practically uninvolved in missions while individuals or small groups from within the churches have aggressively carried on foreign mission work” (Peters, *Biblical Theology*, 216–217).

The Network.¹³ Paul's ministry in the New Testament forms a beautiful pattern:¹⁴ Paul establishes a church in a new location, he moves on to plant another church in a new city or region, and then he returns to previously planted churches to further cultivate his connection with them. Paul's ongoing cultivation of relationships and collaboration amongst a diverse body of churches strengthens those churches, encourages their leaders, and advances the gospel in tangible ways.

Every generation of leaders must strive to enjoy the kind of fruitful interdependence that reproduces this biblical pattern. "The narrative of Paul's missionary work," writes Eckhard Schnabel, "provides a paradigm, a model for the mission of the church."¹⁵

A church leadership choosing to lead with absolute independence from other churches is missing God's design for both the local and universal church.

Perhaps these churches could have survived on their own. But history proves they were better together. They gave generously to the poor together, they helped plant more churches throughout the Mediterranean together, and in the coming centuries they would contend for orthodox theology together.

Radical autonomy is never celebrated or encouraged in the Scriptures — nor within the Trinity. The need for deep connection across diverse churches does not undermine the autonomy of local churches any more than the deep communion experienced between Father and Son diminishes the role of the Spirit. In other words, a church leadership choosing to lead with absolute independence from other churches is missing God's design for both the local and universal church.

There is room in Scripture for various ways to reflect this interdependence and we must be careful not to overly spiritualize our own preferences or traditions. Collectives and networks exist to balance the tension between God's local design for congregations and his global design for vitally connected churches. Missiologist Paul Hiebert puts it this way:

"The future of missions is based in the formation of international networks rather than multinational organizations. Networks build up people, not programs; they stress

¹³ This section is adapted from a Great Commission Collective white paper titled "A Vision for Church Planting Networks." You can read the entire piece at:

<https://gccollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-Vision-For-Church-PlantingNetworks-Final-v6.pdf>.

¹⁴ The patterns of this beautiful fabric of ministry are explored by these authors, who draw out practical conclusions about applying Paul's methods today:

- J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015).
- Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry, eds., *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Times and Ours* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).C.
- Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

¹⁵ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 377.

partnership and servanthood, not hierarchy; they help to build up the local church, not undermine it.”¹⁶

Networks are voluntary associations, not hierarchical obligations. They are at their best when flexible, dynamic, and nimble.¹⁷ Their focus should not be on growing the organization, but rather strengthening and equipping churches for mission. However, while we necessarily talk in terms of network *churches*, the primary target for network training, counseling, and care is really *pastors*.

Aiming at pastors rather than whole churches ensures the network does not create mission goals without the role or authority to achieve them.¹⁸ So the aim of strengthening churches is achieved primarily through the training and care of pastors. But the lines here are soft enough to allow networks to speak of member churches or churches partnering together over merely a club of like-minded pastors.

Speaking generally, a “church planting network” is: Churches partnering for multiplication through message, ministries, models, movement & money .¹⁹

¹⁶ *Partners in the Gospel: The Strategic Role of Partnership in World Evangelization*, a BGC Monograph, ed. by James H. Kraakevik and Dotsey Welliver (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 1992), xiii.

¹⁷ In *Center Church*, Tim Keller contrasts movements (which would include networks) with institutions. The four characteristics of a movement include “vision, sacrifice, flexibility with unity, and spontaneity.” (Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel Centered Ministry in Your City*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 339).

¹⁸ Elders have the authority to lead the local church. If a network creates a mission aimed at serving and influencing the autonomous elder-led churches, the network assumes an authority it does not possess and could potentially confuse the people and undermine the elders’ role in leading the church. One of the best ways for networks to serve churches is by serving pastors.

¹⁹ In their book *Churches Partnering Together*, Chris Bruno and Matt Dirks define kingdom partnership as, “a gospel-driven relationship between interdependent local churches that strategically pray, work and share resources together to glorify God by kingdom-advancing goals they could not accomplish alone” (*Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 18.

Executed by Qualified Pastor-Planters²⁰

What does it mean to be a church-planter? To serve God's commissioned church, church planting must be executed by called and qualified planters. Before we define what that means, though, let's establish a few preliminary ground rules for this discussion.

First, much of what we're looking for in a planter are qualities that are expected of all believers. For instance, we're expecting church planters to have godly character — to be “soberminded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable... not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money... [and to] manage his own household well” (1 Tim. 3:2–4). These are obligations from which no Christian is exempt.²¹ Still, it's slightly unsettling to see the criteria assembled in one place; it can feel like we're raining down unreachable standards from a cloud of condemnation. But the truth is we're not looking for superheroes. What we're actually looking for is evidence of God's grace.

Secondly, men don't qualify for church planting through assessments alone but by training and discipline. This is why the network spends time and money on equipping church planters. When individuals or churches contribute to our collective, they are investing in the future of gospel mission.

This leads to the final clarifying point:

If you are called to plant, God will deliver you the grace, gifting, and godliness necessary to lead this new church.

The verb tense carried throughout the two most common passages that speak to the requirements of being an elder is present tense (1 Tim. 3: 1–7; Titus 1:5–9).²² Paul is not looking for potential qualities but present ones. Assembled here are not aspirations for the

²⁰ There are four reasons church planters should also be viewed as pastors:

1. By definition, church planters are called by God to a specific location to fill a brief or abiding role in establishing a local church. By doing this, they take the form of a mobile pastor elder.
2. The church planter begins his pastoral tasks on the very morning that the new church is launched. Typically, within the first few weeks, the church planter serves a small group of attenders — perhaps even members — by providing shepherd care and leadership.
3. The church planter is — whether he desires it or not — endowed with pastoral status in the eyes of those attending the new church. It is, after all, in his title.
4. The church planter is most often the first elder of the new church. No matter how you slice it, he's an elder. This is probably what led Aubrey Malphurs to conclude, “The qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 . . . are qualifications for elders *but are also essential for church planters*” (Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Guide for New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004, 92, emphasis mine).

²¹ “The minister today,” says Joel Nederhood, “is really nothing more than an ordinary member of the church of Jesus Christ, who is called to express His nature as ‘man of God’ in an especially high degree” (“The Minister's Call,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, Samuel T. Logan, ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Books, 1986, 39).

²² “Very importantly, the controlling verbs of all the requirements of the overseer listed in 1 Tim 3:2–6 are all present tense. They are δεῖ (Pres Act Ind 3 Sg) ‘it is necessary,’ and . . . εἶναι (Pres Act Infin)” (George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 160).

pastor-planter, but preconditions which have surfaced in the man's life through the distinct workings of God's grace. The aim of assessment, then, is to uncover the ongoing evidence of grace already present in his life. Networks should partner with candidates to search for God's empowering activity, to discover God-charged impulses, and to bring forth the gifts and godliness needed for a successful church plant.

How Can Partnership Be Expressed in the Assessment Process? Clear roles are the life blood of partnerships. Where they are present and readily embraced a union pulses with life. Marriage endures when the words "husband" and "wife" have a clear meaning to the couple. Even the British music invasion of the Sixties would have stalled on the beach if the Beatles had all played the same instrument. Whether it's the Temptations, the Stones, or the Red Hot Chili Peppers, there's just no rock without roles. Think about business and entertainment: HewlettPackard, Ben and Jerry, Penn and Teller, Batman and Robin. Each alliance flourishes, not only because of a partnership but due to the specific roles each member embraces within the partnership. Scratch a fruitful partnership anywhere and it will bleed clear roles.

Networks partners with local church leaders to plant churches. Vital to this mission is the assessment of church planters. Both the network and the local church play vital roles in this glorious endeavor, and both must understand and gladly affirm one another's roles. Meaningful service to the planter and mission effectiveness for the network demand that these roles be clear.

The local church's role: When it comes to assessing leaders for mission, the local church has the first role and the most circumspect eyes for assessment. The local church incubates, supplies, and/or sponsors church planters.²³ Each church should begin assessing the potential planter in key vital areas: Is he godly? Is his home healthy? Is he gifted and called to plant? Does he demonstrate giftedness for preaching, shepherding, and leadership?

The network's role: The network involved, likewise, must be clear on its unique role: to serve the local church by marshalling proven ministry experience and specialized expertise for the sake of assessment. For example, for the Great Commission Collective, this involves the following:

- GCC *requires* a potential planter to be sponsored by a local GCC church.
- GCC *confirms* the planter's theological depth and grasp of the gospel.
- GCC *evaluates* the candidate's fit with the network's DNA (the six attributes and seven cultural distinctives).
- GCC *corroborates* the church's evaluation of the planter's depth of character, marital health, and breadth of leadership.

²³ To use Great Commission Collective as an example, GCC seeks to open up opportunities to assess qualified men who do not come from affiliated churches. Where this happens, there would need to be a network church that sponsors the candidate and assists him in the process of orientation.

- GCC *affirms* that the planter possesses public ministry skills that are sufficient to plant and pastor a healthy church.
- GCC *assesses* the planter's shepherding capacity and the scope of his love for the lost.

Clarifying our roles in the assessment process is an important step. Still, our trust is not anchored in our assessment model, defined roles, or the size of our network. We stand confident and united because Christ was assessed in our place and took the condemnation that was due to us so that we might walk in freedom and liberty, stand united for mission, and ultimately bow together in worship (Phil. 2:9-10).

Catalyzed by Funding

At the close of his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone" (Phil. 4:15 CSB). Paul's relationship with the Philippians was characterized by reciprocity, "the matter of giving and receiving."²⁴ Reciprocity signifies the sort of large-souled mutuality we inhabit together when network and church leaders partner together. The biblical idea of reciprocity makes three claims:

Claim #1: Missional Generosity. Missional generosity takes two forms: operational and missional giving. Your operational giving says, in effect, "The biblical values we cherish for our network are so important to us that we want to dedicate personnel for the purpose of shepherding these values and reproducing them through our church planting efforts."

A healthy partnership is only possible when a network's commitment to serve local church leaders is met with a corresponding desire on the part of the local churches to serve the network.

To create a focused pathway to facilitate missional giving, the Great Commission Collective created the Great Commission Fund—an account funded by member churches who give over and beyond their operational giving commitment²⁵ and private benefactors who desire to see the gospel spread through church planting. Network churches are encouraged to support the mission by giving to this fund. The money in this account directly impacts what is possible for church planting. If there is no money, the network is unable to support new plants.

Claim #2: Collaboration. A healthy partnership is only possible when a network's commitment to serve local church leaders is met with a corresponding desire on the part of

²⁴ "Since Paul refers in Phil 1:12 to the 'progress of the gospel'... the believers in Philippi contribute to the 'progress of the gospel' through their financial support of the apostle and through their own missionary activity in Philippi." Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and The Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1460.

²⁵

the local churches to serve the network. Yes, that does involve giving money. But equally important is a commitment to be a brotherhood with a common mission: planting churches and strengthening leaders.

Every church leader must share a stake in the future of their partnerships. The responsibility for finding and addressing problems belongs to everyone. If we are truly going to function effectively in church planting, then we must collaborate. We must build a sustainable forward-focused, intentional, and creative culture *together*. Collaboration means that we all own the quality of what we do and together take responsibility for the future we are building together.

This may include mining our local churches for the best ministry models and then putting them into circulation so that churches can get in on the best of what's happening throughout the network. Some church leaders reciprocate and go the extra mile by giving their time and talents to serve other pastors, churches, and church planting teams.

Join, give, and serve one another.

Claim# 3: Prioritizing the Church. This final claim is laid upon church planters. Networks can help churches and church planters by providing assessment, training, and funding. Giving is not intended, however, to cover all the costs of a church plant. This is why training processes should include mentoring on how to raise money. In fact, one way that church planters help to confirm their call to the field is by raising the money necessary to plant the church. The responsibility for any financial needs that remain beyond the network's funds do not lay with the collective or collective churches but with the local church. Planters must prioritize the church by ensuring the financial needs for the church are fully met. As Paul Carter says:

*Denominations should be very cautious about transferring money to churches that are struggling to pay a pastor. Pastors should be very cautious about allowing denominations to subsidize their pay benefits. Money talks. It tells you whether or not the people in your church actually value gospel ministry. If they don't then your labors would be better spent elsewhere.*²⁶

Generally speaking, gospel ministers should make their living from gospel work.²⁷ While ministry must not be viewed as a means of gain, a pastor should expect those benefiting from his ministry labor to supply his needs (and the needs of his family).²⁸ There may be exceptions to that rule such as a global pandemic causing economic slowdown, demographic shifts, or seasons of persecution. But, generally speaking, if a church doesn't grow or becomes too small to support its pastor properly, it may be prudent to

²⁶ Paul Carter, "Should Pastors Be Paid?" *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), Canadian edition, January 9, 2019, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/should-pastors-be-paid/>

²⁷ Matt. 10: 8-10; 1 Tim. 5:17-18.

²⁸ 1 Peter 5:1-4.

unite the work with another gospel-believing congregation that can help the church fulfill this responsibility. It may also be necessary for the church planter/pastor to consider shifting into a bi-vocational role.²⁹

While Paul seemed to believe it was his right to receive financial support for his labor, his pattern seems to be to divest himself of that right while planting a church. Instead he would either work as a tentmaker or receive financial support from an already established church or churches.

Two principles emerge for us today. First, mission activity is to be supported by either the tentmaking activity of the church planter or by established churches. Paul's example shows us that it is most desirable to have the support from established churches so that full-time focus can be given to the work of planting. Still, the church planter should consider tentmaking when that is not available. Second, when a church is being planted, they must be taught to support the gospel laborer as soon as possible.

Contextualized to Culture³⁰

In his native city, everyone liked Sal's preaching. But when he moved to the rolling foothills of Tennessee, Sal's theological language and illustrations from church history fell from his lips to the sanctuary floor with a thud. He was a stellar church planting candidate. He was likeable, caring, gifted, and a distinguished graduate from a respected seminary. But what happened?

Ricard, an urban pastor in Europe, believes the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. He holds that conviction deeply, believing that gospel preaching is the only thing his inner city congregation really needs. After all, Ricard was once an opioid addict who was liberated from his prison by the gospel. He wants others to experience and enjoy the same power that set him free. Still, Ricard is relatively unknown within his community. He rarely attends any neighborhood events and spends much of his time office-bound, doing sermon-preparation. After two years, he's disillusioned and ready to give up. "Nobody listens to me," he laments to his wife, "Why do I still feel like an outsider in my own city?"

Both Sal and Ricard remind us that passing an assessment process is an entirely different thing from planting a church. Gifting, or even a great wife, do not constitute a slam-dunk in the planting world. Church planters must love their community well enough to understand

²⁹ "More church planters are *choosing* to plant bi-vocationally. They are making this decision out of the conviction that bi-vocational church planting actually provides a more desirable way to plant a new church, rather than on the basis of limited funds. In other words, it is becoming a first option, not a last resort" (Brad Briscoe, *Co-vocational Church Planting: Aligning Your Marketplace Calling and the Mission of God*, ebook, Alpharetta, GA: Send Network, 2018), 21.

³⁰ The term "contextualization" was first used by Shoki Coe in a Theological Education by Extension (TEE) document: *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, 1970-1977*, (Bromley, England: Theological Education Fund, 1972), 139-45.

it and speak its language clearly while sharing the gospel within the culture they inhabit.³¹ In the parlance of missiology, they must be assessed for how well they contextualize.

This section is not meant to be an extensive analysis of the study, history, or the essential nature of contextualization. Such an endeavor, while legitimate, is beyond the scope of this paper and may already be assumed by the audience. My goal, rather, is to provide a broad overview of what kind of contextualization is necessary for church planting with this method.

Culture can confound; we must recognize that the gospel is never proclaimed outside of culture, and all churches are planted within some culture or cultures. Planting with an awareness of culture and adapting where appropriate is the aim of contextualization. To that end, we want to affirm two applications of contextualization vital to this model.

Application #1: Heart Language. Contextualizing, at least in his way, begins with hearing the *heart language of a people*. Looking and listening are the keys. Do we hear and understand what drives our new community? Are we able to exegete the culture we inhabit? A culture carries values. As you listen, ask, and look at the culture you inhabit, what shared beliefs and standards appear to be surfacing? What seems to be important to the people you are called to reach? What are their hopes, dreams, idols, fears, symbols, and stories? Can we define how they understand and reach for the ‘good life’?

Don’t settle for superficial surveys. A little digging can unearth invaluable and insightful cultural treasures. What are your community’s felt needs? How does sin and brokenness express itself uniquely within this culture?

Most church planters assimilate into their community; for church planters, that’s a first step, perhaps even a heroic step. But real church planting begins by arriving with eyes wide open, even if our location has become a familiar space. We must learn to speak the language and understand the values of the community we serve. Both Sal and Ricard, our example church planters above, lived within their community’s borders without truly knowing and understanding the people they were called to serve.

A church planter should be fluent in the community’s heart language — their values, metaphors, and the way they mourn, celebrate, and gather together.

Luke records how one day while waiting for Silas and Timothy, the Apostle Paul was strolling through Athens when “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). The Athenians worshipped hundreds of idols. They even had one “to the unknown god,” just to make sure no one was excluded. As Paul saw this city submerged in idols, his spirit was provoked. He was deeply distressed. We often think of

³¹ “Culture is the “artificial, secondary environment” which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values” (H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 32.

provocation only in negative terms. For Paul, provocation revealed perception. He was distressed because he understood that the Athenians were seduced by paganism and pantheism. They felt truth was only a voyage, never a destination. “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:20).

Paul studied Athens. He walked through the community, stopping and stooping to read the idol inscriptions. What did an altar to an unknown god mean to them? Paul understood that culture not only carries values but reveals needs. By listening, he was able to discover those needs. The Athenians' lostness began to take shape in Paul's mind. He gained gospel insight. The community's heart language began to be heard.³²

Application #2: Gospel Language. For a doctor, diagnosing the illness is an essential step but not the only step. For a doctor to heal, she must supply the solution, the prescription. Likewise, in gospel speech, contextualization supplies the prescription of the gospel in a wise and loving way.

When Paul stood to speak to the Athenians, he was prepared. He informed them of what he learned (Acts 17:22–23). Then he skillfully used the “altar to an unknown god” to bridge over to the gospel. Paul saw the idol as a kind of “redemptive analogy,”³³ a gospel analogy set within the culture, to provide a bridge from the Athenians to Jesus. Paul didn't just understand the problem of idol worship, he knew how to prescribe the solution. Knowing the heart language provided the opportunity for *gospel language*.

Gospel language for a church planter happens as he displays a facility for connecting community brokenness to gospel hope. Gospel speech moves us beyond simply perceiving idols or protesting idols to unveiling how the gospel speaks lovingly and prophetically to a people enslaved by idolatry.

Paul continues his tutorial for us on how to contextualize by turning a cultural artifact, the altar to an unknown god, into an Introduction to Theology course: he speaks of God the Creator (v. 24), God the Sustainer (v. 25), God the Ruler (v. 26), God the Father (vv. 28–29), and God the Judge (v. 31).³⁴ Paul continues by referencing a popular hymn from Epimendes (v. 28), cites a stoic poet, and then lands the sermon with a call to repentance. Paul spoke Greek, thought Greek, and loved these Greeks enough to contextualize the unchanging gospel so that it spoke to the Athenian heart.

³² Ed Stetzer, “What is Contextualization? Presenting the Gospel in Culturally Relevant Ways,” *The Exchange* (blog), October 12, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/october/what-is-contextualization.html>

³³ This term was coined by Don Richardson who defines redemptive analogy as “strange cultural customs which provide analogies to the gospel” in *Eternity in Their Hearts*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 112.

³⁴ Adapted from John Stott's commentary on Acts, *The Message of Acts*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1994).

Gospel language means Paul was able to see what the Athenian idols revealed about their longings, desires, and sins in order to point them to Jesus. He set before them examples from their music, religious life, and books using gospel speech to trace the image of God for the Greek mind and heart. Paul was neither hip — pandering to pop culture — nor a fundamentalist — reacting to the culture with rules and laws.

Instead, he spoke gospel language. Sal and Ricard were never assessed for it. As a result, they arrived at their mission fields with the right skills but were ignorant about how to navigate the terrain.

It's not enough to send church planters to the field. We must ensure they speak the right language — both the culture's heart language and the language of the gospel.

Why Plant Churches?

How often does the mere subject line of an unread email grab you? It happened to me a while back when I received an email where the subject line read: *Why Plant Churches?*

The email came from a guy in a church we planted. He spoke of his father, a man entrenched in his apathy toward God. Prayers were lifted, tears were shed, but nothing seemed to penetrate the steely cynicism within his dad. Eventually a church planter came to town, God smiled on the launch, and in the process of outreach, the newly minted church came in contact with the dad who was dead in sin and lost in the world.

The grace of God through the people of God is fragrant, and this father began to smell the aroma of Christ. The men of this new church were reaching out — a breakfast here, a golf game there, kind words and deeds — all simply to befriend and communicate God's love to this man. Slowly, God's grace prevailed, and the gospel took hold of this father's heart. On an evening marked from eternity past, the father bowed his knee to Jesus. Several weeks later he was baptized. Then, years later, he passed from this world into the arms of the Savior.

In relating this story through the email, the man's son, a quiet observer of this entire odyssey, wrote to say he now understood why our churches collaborate to plant churches. We plant churches to see dads reconciled to God and then to their kids. We plant churches to see the power of God in hearts of broken people. We plant churches because it's about life and death, with eternity hanging in the balance.

Though difficult, though church planters often toil in the shadows and hard places, and though church planting consumes enormous amounts of time, energy, and finances, we are convinced planting churches is the most biblically-faithful way of fulfilling the Great Commission...and that's why we plant churches.

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Additional Resources

This paper was written in service to the Great Commission Collective and was originally published on gccollective.org.

For a deeper study on how partnerships help church planting, check out my book, [Stronger Together: 7 Partnership Virtues and Vices that Subvert Them](#).

For additional resources, visit RevDaveHarvey.com/LeadershipPerspectives.