



# ORGANIC CHURCH PLANTING



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO STARTING  
— AND SUSTAINING —  
AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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**PART ONE**  
PLANTING THE SEED—  
BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR  
CHURCH PLANTING

# CHAPTER 1

## THE DIVINE PATTERN OF CHURCH FORMATION

*We must return to the beginning, to the “genesis” of the church, to see what He said and did then. It is there we find the highest expression of His will. Acts is the “genesis” of the church’s history, and the church in the time of Paul is the “genesis” of the Spirit’s work. Conditions in the church today are vastly different from what they were then, but these present conditions could never be our example, or our authoritative guide; we must return to the “beginning.” Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal will of God.*

—Watchman Nee

Over the last fifty years, there have been nearly one hundred books written on the subject of church planting. Some of these books have the subject nailed down to a fine science. But what is surprising is

that few of them discuss the ways in which churches were planted in the beginning.

To my mind, it's a profound mistake to ignore what we find in the book of Acts concerning the manner in which Christian communities were birthed in the first century. As Watchman Nee writes,

*Never let us regard these early chapters of Acts as inapplicable today. Like the book of Genesis, the Acts of the Apostles reveals the beginnings of God's ways, and what He did then sets a pattern for His work always.*<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament presents four ways in which churches were planted in century one. These ways weren't cultural fads or the nifty ideas of intelligent mortals. I believe they originated with God Himself.

## The Jerusalem Model

The first way occurred in the city of Jerusalem. Twelve apostles planted one church by the preaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14—8:3). After a period of time, the church multiplied by “transplantation” or “migration.”<sup>2</sup>

Because this approach began first in Jerusalem, we'll call it the *Jerusalem Model*. According to the New Testament narrative, after

1 Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs* (Richmond, VA: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), 7.

2 Note that the images of *planting* and *transplantation* are that of organic farming. This is because the church is an organic, biotic life (1 Cor. 3:6–8; 12:1ff.).

four years, the seeds of the Jerusalem church were scattered and transplanted all throughout Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Because of persecution, the believers in Jerusalem relocated to other locales, shared their faith, and churches sprang up as a result (Acts 8:1–8; 11:19–21). For a time, the twelve apostles remained in the city.<sup>4</sup>

One of the outstanding characteristics of the Jerusalem dispersion is that all the Christians in Jerusalem had experienced organic church life *before* they relocated to form new churches. In other words, they brought to other regions their experience of Christ and the church. This is a vital point as we will later see.

Significantly, the newly transplanted churches in Palestine received the help of the apostles—even though they were not directly planted by them. The Twelve circulated to the new church plants, watering the seeds and pulling up weeds (Acts 9:32—11:30). While the apostles helped establish and encourage these new churches, they did not live in them, nor did they control their affairs.

## The Antioch Model

The classic way in which churches were planted in the first century began in Antioch of Syria. This model of church planting is most clearly seen in Acts 13:1—20:38. Here we discover that Paul and his coworkers were sent out from Antioch to establish churches in South Galatia, Greece, and Asia Minor. This way of planting churches

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<sup>3</sup> All chronological dating used in this book is based on the research in my book *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*.

<sup>4</sup> Keep in mind that while the twelve apostles did not leave the city of Jerusalem for many years, the church in Jerusalem was extremely large. It numbered in the thousands. Consequently, this new church called for over ten apostles to establish the ground floor. All of these factors make Jerusalem, the first church on earth, unique.

can be called the *Antioch Model*. It can also be called “fresh seed planting.”<sup>5</sup>

(Incidentally, Paul’s journeys are best described as “church planting trips” or “apostolic journeys.” The popular term *missionary journey* was created in the nineteenth century and is a poor fit with the nature and goal of Paul’s ministry.<sup>6</sup> More on that later.)

The *Antioch Model* can be described thusly: An apostle walks bare-handed into a city to preach Jesus Christ. He does not preach the “Four Spiritual Laws,” the “Romans road,” the “plan of salvation,” or Christian theology. Nor does he preach himself (2 Cor. 4:5). Instead, he preaches a Person—*Jesus Christ*.<sup>7</sup>

New converts are made as a result of the preaching of Christ. Some of them may be religious people who have a relationship with God already (the Jews). Others have never met God (the Gentiles).

After leading people into a genuine encounter with God in Christ, the apostle shows the young church how to live by the indwelling life of its newly found Lord. He discloses to the believers the eternal purpose of God, and this becomes the church’s consuming vision.

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5 Some have called this method “catalytic church planting.” Others have called it “the Antioch line” of planting churches.

6 The term *missionary journey* finds its origin in nineteenth-century German commentaries on Paul. It was probably influenced by the fact that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise of world missionary work coupled with the economic exploitation of India, Africa, the Orient, and elsewhere by Europeans. (The commentaries of A. Schlatter confirm this.) As far as I know, the earliest reference to *missionary journey* in English is in David Thomas’s *A Homiletic Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* published in 1870. The word *mission* was not used to refer to human outreach until the sixteenth century. Before that time, it was used to refer to the sending of Jesus by the Father and the sending of the Spirit by the Father and Son (John 17:18). The Jesuits were the first to use the term *mission* to refer to the spreading of the Christian faith. In time, the word *mission* came to refer to the sending of people across frontiers to propagate the Christian faith, convert the heathens, plant churches, and improve society (R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* [Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 1999], 192).

7 See Acts 2:22–36; 8:5, 12, 35; 9:17–20; 10:38–43; 11:19–20; 17:2–3; Rom. 16:25; Gal. 3:1; 1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:5.

(Note that God's eternal purpose—His grand mission—is God-centered, not human-centered.) In short, the apostle imparts into the spirits of the believing community the same “heavenly vision” that he himself has received (Acts 26:13; Gal. 1:15–16).

The apostle also passes on to the new church the apostolic tradition that originated with Jesus (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). He unfolds the unsearchable riches of Christ, His greatness, and His all-sufficiency to the hearts of God's people (Eph. 3:8). This is what it means to build a church on Jesus Christ as the only foundation (Matt. 7:24ff.; 16:16–18; 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20). Having the Lord Jesus Christ as the foundation means that the church learns to wholly depend upon, rest in, and live by Christ.

The gospel that the first-century apostles preached was one of Christ's lordship and God's pure and unfailing grace in Him. Paul of Tarsus, for example, did not forge people together with rules, religious duty, or legalism. Instead, he preached a gospel of grace so high and so powerful that it kicked down the gates of hell—setting the Jew free from religious duty and the Gentile free from immorality. His was a double-barreled, two-fisted gospel.

The aftermath of such ministry is that the newly founded church stood awash with the glories, the joys, and the freedom of Jesus Christ (Acts 13:52; 2 Cor. 1:24; 3:17). Note that the early apostles had been given a glorious, breathtaking revelation of Christ, which poured out of their spirits *before* they could impart that revelation to others. Consider Paul's words:

*To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him.  
(Gal. 1:16 KJV)*

The immediate and long-lasting fruit of this heavenly vision was this: God's people fell in love with their Lord and with one another.

In effect, Paul and his coworkers instructed the new Christians on how to live by the Christ who indwelt them. They showed them how to fellowship with the Lord together and individually. They equipped God's people to function corporately under the Lord's direct headship without any human officiation. The apostles also prepared the believers for the trials that they were bound to face in the future (Acts 14:22; 20:31; 1 Thess. 3:4). Consequently, the apostolic ministry was not only spiritual; it was intensely practical.<sup>8</sup>

After saturating the new believers with a revelation of Christ, Paul did the unthinkable. He abandoned the church into the Lord's hands. He gently pushed the believers out of their nest and left them on their own. And he did so without hiring a pastor, a clergyman, or appointing elders to supervise them. What is more, he left the church on its own in its *infancy* and in the face of imminent persecution.

According to the *Antioch Model*, the apostle typically spent anywhere from three to six months laying the ground floor of a church before leaving it. This means that Paul and his coworkers would abandon a church when it was just beginning to crawl. Elders eventually emerged within many of the assemblies and were publicly recognized. But this came later. And the elders' task was never that of governing or controlling the church. Nor was it to

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8 Most of Paul's letters follow a similar pattern: First he deals with spiritual reality (e.g., Eph. 1—3; Col. 1—2; Rom. 1—11), then he deals with the practical matters of church life (e.g., Eph. 4—6; Col. 3—4; Rom. 12—16).



monopolize the church's ministry. (I've discussed this in depth elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>)

Notwithstanding, once leaving, the apostle didn't return to the church for a long period of time, anywhere from six months to two years.

This is the pattern of church planting as shown to us by Paul after he was sent out from Antioch. What a mighty, fireproof gospel Paul must have delivered to these new converts. What confidence in the risen Christ he must have had to do such a startling thing as to leave a church on its own while it was still in diapers. Roland Allen astutely observes,

*The facts are these: St. Paul preached in a place for five or six months and then left behind him a church, not indeed free from the need of guidance, but capable of growth and expansion.... The question before us is, how he could so train his converts as to be able to leave them after so short a time with any security that they would be able to stand and grow. It seems at first sight almost incredible.... What could he have taught them in five or six months?*<sup>10</sup>

The net effect is that the apostle's gospel was tested to its core. If the gospel he preached was indeed Christ, or as Paul put it—if it was made of “gold, silver, and precious stones”—the church would stand through crisis (1 Cor. 3:6–15). On the other hand, if the gospel that

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9 See my book *Reimagining Church*.

10 Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 84–85.

the apostle brought was made of combustible materials—“wood, hay, and stubble”—it would burn to the ground when any heat came to try it.<sup>11</sup>

If an apostle plants the church using imperishable materials and it is nurtured properly, all it needs will spontaneously develop from within. In time, prophets, shepherds, evangelists, overseers, etc. will naturally and organically emerge—just as naturally and organically as the physical members develop on an infant as it matures. T. Austin-Sparks speaks of this experience, saying,

*Thus, having set aside all the former system of organised Christianity, we committed ourselves to the principle of the organic. No “order” was “set up,” no officers or ministries were appointed. We left it with the Lord to make manifest by “gift” and anointing who were chosen of Him for oversight and ministry. The one-man ministry has never emerged. The “overseers” have never been chosen by vote or selection, and certainly not by the expressed desire of any leader. No committees or official bodies have ever existed in any part of the work. Things in the main have issued from prayer.<sup>12</sup>*

Such organic development is basic to all life-forms. A rose seed has within its germ a stem, leaves, and a budding flower. If the seed is planted and properly nurtured, these features will naturally manifest

<sup>11</sup> According to F. E. Bruce, this text has in view the fire of persecution as well as the fire of judgment on the last day, which will test every person's work in this life. The same concept appears in Matt. 7:24–27.

<sup>12</sup> T. Austin-Sparks, *Explanation of the Nature and History of “This Ministry”* (Tulsa, OK: Emmanuel Church, 2004), 18.

themselves in time. In the same way, the requisite gifts and ministries of the church of Jesus Christ will naturally develop if it's planted and nurtured properly—for they are built into her very DNA.

Biblically speaking, a church is a spiritual organism, not a human organization.<sup>13</sup> It's a biological entity. As such, it develops naturally when the agent who planted it leaves it on its own. Of course, church planters should return periodically to water it, fertilize it, and pull up the weeds that seek to choke its life. Hence, a large part of an apostle's task is to keep foreign elements out of the church so that it can grow naturally and organically. (More on that later.)

This understanding of church development is in stark contrast to the prevalent model of trying to appoint various ministries and gifts (like elders, prophets, and teachers) on the basis of a *pro forma* adherence to a “New Testament pattern.” Such a mechanical method of church formation will only produce a pathetic, paper-thin image of the church. It's like trying to create a mature rose by locating stem, leaves, and petals, then stringing them together with nylon thread. It is a violation of the organic, innate nature of the church, and it defies the biblical reality that the *ekklesia* is, in fact, a living organism.

All told, the *Antioch Model* rests on the suppositions that the church is organic, it's born by a presentation of Jesus Christ, and it organically grows in the absence of the founding apostle after he leaves it on its own. Yet it requires his return to oversee the church's growth and keep foreign elements from choking and corrupting its life (Acts 13—20). As Howard Snyder says, “Church growth is

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13 If a church grows up to be an organization like Microsoft or General Motors, it ceases to be a church in the biblical sense of the word.

a matter of removing the hindrances to growth. The church will naturally grow if not limited by unbiblical barriers.”

The *Antioch Model*, or “fresh seed planting,” is the classic way in which churches were raised up in the first century. Again, Roland Allen candidly observes,

*In a very few years, he [Paul] built the church on so firm a basis that it could live and grow in faith and in practice, that it could work out its own problems, and overcome all dangers and hindrances both from within and without.*<sup>14</sup>

So in the *Jerusalem Model*, the church leaves the apostolic worker. But in the *Antioch Model*, the apostolic worker leaves the church. But the end result is the same: Once the foundation of a church is laid by an apostolic worker, God’s people are left on their own without any extralocal help. Comparing the *Antioch* and *Jerusalem Models*, Watchman Nee writes,

*We find there are two ways of preaching the gospel and of establishing churches—two distinct methods illustrated respectively by Jerusalem and Antioch. From Antioch apostles go forth; from Jerusalem scattered saints go forth. In the one case, bands of apostles move out—it may be Paul and Barnabas, or Paul and Silas, or Paul and Timothy—to preach the gospel from place to place, to form churches, and to return. In the other*

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<sup>14</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 7.

*case, those who believe emigrate to new cities and new lands, preaching and telling of the Lord Jesus wherever they go; and wherever these who migrate are found, churches spring up.*<sup>15</sup>

## The Ephesian Model

A third type of church planting began in the city of Ephesus. Therefore, we'll call it the *Ephesian Model*. In his later years, Paul traveled to Ephesus. Before he descended on that city, however, he had planted approximately eight churches over a period of seven years.

What Paul accomplished in Ephesus was as unique as it was brilliant. He made Ephesus a training center from which the gospel would go forth and where young men could be trained to plant churches. Paul rented a meeting place called the "Hall of Tyrannus" where he preached and taught every day from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.<sup>16</sup> This part of the training went on for two solid years. The men who Paul trained were:

- ✿ Titus from Antioch.
- ✿ Timothy from Lystra.
- ✿ Gaius from Derbe.

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15 Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs* (Richmond, VA: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), 6–7.

16 The Western text of Acts 19:9 says that Paul used the hall from "the fifth hour to the tenth" (from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.). F. F. Bruce points out that this reading is quite probable. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts (Revised): New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 366; and F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 290.

- ✦ Aristarchus from Thessalonica.
- ✦ Secundus from Thessalonica.
- ✦ Sopator from Berea.
- ✦ Tychicus from Ephesus.
- ✦ Trophimus from Ephesus.

Epaphras from Colosse could also be added to the list. It appears that Paul led him to the Lord while he was in Ephesus.<sup>17</sup> Sometime afterward, Epaphras planted three churches in the Lycus valley of Asia Minor: one in Colosse, one in Laodicea, and one in Hierapolis (Col. 1:7; 4:12–13). New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie observes,

*It must have been during this period, for instance, that the churches at Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, all in the Lycus valley, were established, although Paul himself did not visit them. Men like Epaphras and Philemon, who were known to the apostle, possibly came under his influence in the hall of Tyrannus.*<sup>18</sup>

In the same vein, F. F. Bruce writes,

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17 Epaphras seems to be the same person known as Epaphroditus. See John L. McKenzie, S. J., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 239; *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Introduction to the Epistle to the Colossians*. Both Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25; 4:18) and Epaphras (Philem. 23; Col. 1:7; 4:12) were coworkers with Paul, and both were with Paul during the same Roman imprisonment. Epaphras planted churches, and Paul calls Epaphroditus an *apostolos* (Phil. 2:25). This all suggests that they were one person. Further, “the name occurs very frequently in inscriptions both Greek and Latin, whether at full length Epaphroditus, or in its contracted form Epaphras” (J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [Bellingham, WA: Logos, 1913], 123).

18 Donald Guthrie, *The Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 176.

*To this great city, then, Paul came ... and stayed there for the best part of three years, directing the evangelization of Ephesus itself and of the province as a whole. Plainly he was assisted in this work by a number of colleagues—like Epaphras, who evangelized the Phrygian cities of the Lycus valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis)—and so effectively did they work that, as Luke puts it, “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”<sup>19</sup>*

While the New Testament doesn't explicitly say that Paul trained eight men in Ephesus, it strongly suggests it. Consider the following points:

- ✿ All eight men were present in Ephesus with Paul during his lengthy season there.<sup>20</sup> Just as the Twelve lived with Jesus for three and a half years, so Paul's apprentices lived with Paul for about the same amount of time. In Ephesus, Paul duplicated the ministry of Jesus Christ in Galilee.
- ✿ The eight men each served as representatives from their churches to bring a financial contribution to Jerusalem. However, instead

<sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 288.

<sup>20</sup> The following passages of Scripture put all eight men in Ephesus during the time that Paul was there: Acts 19:22; 20:4; 21:29; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10, 20 (Paul wrote 1 Cor. from Ephesus). One can infer that Titus was present since Luke never mentions him throughout Acts, yet we know he is present on many occasions from Paul's letters. We learn from 2 Cor. 8 that Titus represented Corinth for the Jerusalem relief fund, and it is clear from Paul's letter to Titus that Paul trained him.

of traveling directly to Jerusalem with their contribution, they met Paul in Ephesus and remained with him for three years. Timothy and Gaius were from Galatia, which is much closer to Jerusalem than was Ephesus.

- ✦ Paul spoke at the Hall of Tyrannus for five hours a day for two years. The intensity of his ministry has all the marks of training on it.
- ✦ Paul paid for his own needs and the needs of these men (Acts 20:34). Why would he support them if he wasn't training them?
- ✦ After the Ephesian trip, Paul sent these men out to work with the churches he planted as well as to plant new churches in new territories. This is similar to Jesus sending out the Twelve on their trial mission (Mark 6:7).

David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman sum up the *Ephesian Model* nicely, saying,

*When Paul left Ephesus, he took with him a cluster of persons to visit some of the churches which he had planted in Macedonia and Greece. We may assume that these persons were leaders he had trained in Ephesus. He wanted them to see the churches he told them about in his church planting classes. These persons included*



*Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus. He wanted these leaders experienced in church development in Asia also to experience Christian fellowship in European churches. This journey was a cross-cultural church planting trip for the leaders whom Paul was training.*<sup>21</sup>

Since Paul's apprentices were from different churches in diverse regions (Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia), they undoubtedly learned from one another as each man shared his unique experience of organic church life in his own culture. Later in the Ephesian training, Paul sent his eight apprentices all over Asia Minor to preach the gospel of Christ and plant new churches. Some of these churches are listed in Revelation 2 and 3. F. F. Bruce writes,

*While Paul stayed in Ephesus, a number of his colleagues carried out missionary activity in neighboring cities. During those years his colleague Epaphras appears to have evangelized the cities of the Lycus valley, Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis—cities which Paul evidently did not visit in person (Colossians 1:7–8; 2:1; 4:12–13). Perhaps all seven of the churches in Asia addressed in the Revelation of John were also founded about this time. The province was intensely evangelized, and remained one of the leading centers of Christianity for many centuries.*<sup>22</sup>

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21 David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 154.

22 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts (Revised): New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 366.

In short, Paul's eight apprentices were the equivalent of the Lord's twelve apostles. The Twelve brought the gospel to the Jewish world; Paul's young coworkers brought it to the Gentile world.

### **The Roman Model**

The fourth and final model is illustrated by the church in Rome. I call it "inverted transplantation." In the *Jerusalem Model*, one church transplants itself into many different cities, thus creating many new churches. But in the *Roman Model*, Christians living in many different churches transplant themselves into one city to found one new church. This is what appears to have happened in Rome, Italy.

The evidence for this model is compelling. Some New Testament scholars have argued that Romans 16 was not written to the church in Rome but to the church in Ephesus. The reason? Paul had never been to Rome before he wrote Romans. Yet he knew all the people listed in chapter 16, some of whom had previously lived in Ephesus.

Others have argued that the people Paul greets in Romans 16 coincidentally moved to Rome, and they all ended up in the same church. But these two theories are unlikely.

It seems that the original Roman church was primarily Jewish. Luke tells us that visitors from Rome came to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and heard Peter preach the gospel (Acts 2:10). It appears that some of them returned to Rome and began to gather there. Priscilla and Aquila were probably part of this group. However, in AD 49, Emperor Claudius passed an edict that expelled all Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2).

When Paul writes his letter to the Romans in AD 57, many Jewish believers are back in the church. Many Gentile believers are in it also. In Romans 16, Paul greets twenty-six individuals and five households, all of whom he knows personally. Virtually all of them have come from the various churches that Paul planted over the years.

The scenario that best fits the evidence is that Paul sent Priscilla and Aquila back to Rome once Claudius's edict was lifted in AD 54. One clue that supports this view is how Priscilla and Aquila helped Paul plant the church in Ephesus. Four years before Paul wrote his famous Roman letter, he brought this remarkable couple to Ephesus and left them there to labor before he returned to plant the Ephesian church (Acts 18:18–19). New Testament scholars William Sanday and Arthur Headlam observe,

*That Prisca and Aquila should be at Rome is just what we might expect from one with so keen an eye for the strategy of a situation as St. Paul. When he was himself established and in full work at Ephesus with the intention of visiting Rome, it would at once occur to him what valuable work they might be doing there and what an excellent preparation they might make for his own visit, while in his immediate surroundings they were almost superfluous. So that instead of presenting any difficulty, that he should send them back to Rome where they were already known, is most natural.<sup>23</sup>*

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23 William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), xxvii.

After sending Priscilla and Aquila ahead of him to Rome, Paul asked various individuals, both Jew and Gentile, from the various churches he planted to move to Rome.<sup>24</sup> The goal? To plant a multicultural church of Jew and Gentile in the cosmopolitan city of Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Paul planned to preach the gospel in Rome and use this newly transplanted church as a platform to reach the city. (He eventually came to Rome, but not in a way that he expected. He arrived there as a prisoner.) The church in Rome turned out to be a glorious church—the envy of the empire.<sup>26</sup>

This reconstruction fits the evidence much better than to assume that Romans 16 is part of the Ephesian letter and was misplaced with the letter to the Romans. There is no strong textual or manuscript evidence that would warrant us to separate Romans 16 from the Roman epistle.<sup>27</sup> It's also more reasonable than to assume that the twenty-six individuals coincidentally relocated to Rome in the space of only three years.<sup>28</sup>

Further, in Romans 15:20, Paul makes plain that he will not build a church on another person's foundation.<sup>29</sup> And he talks to the

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24 He also asked some of his Jewish kinfolk from Jerusalem to relocate to Rome (Rom. 16:7).

25 Other scholars like Peter Lampe have also suggested that Priscilla and Aquila went back to Rome to get a church started and to prepare for Paul's visit there. "The Roman Christians of Romans 16," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. K.P. Donfried, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 220.

26 Tragically, many (if not all) of the believers in Rome were martyred during Nero's slaughter of the Christians in AD 65.

27 Douglas Moo successfully refutes the idea that Romans 16 is not part of the Roman letter in his *Epistle to the Romans: New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 5–9.

28 Priscilla and Aquila moved to Rome sometime after the spring of AD 54, when Claudius's ban was lifted. The letter to the Romans was written in the winter of AD 57.

29 Douglas Moo says that the church in Rome was not planted or visited by any other apostle before Paul wrote his letter (*Epistle to the Romans*, 897). F. F. Bruce says that this text is not in direct reference to the Roman church (*Romans: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], 248). And Ben Witherington says, "Nothing we find in Romans suggests that the Christian community there has an apostolic foundation, much less a Peterine apostolic foundation" (*Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], 354).

Romans as if he were their apostle. In Romans 1:15, Paul says that he will preach the gospel in Rome when he arrives in the city. Several scholars working in the field of epistolography have concluded that Paul sent his greetings in Romans 16 in order to make evident the nature of his relationship with the believers in Rome and thus establish his apostolic authority there.<sup>30</sup>

Piecing all the evidence together, then, it's reasonable to believe that Paul is the apostle in Rome by inverted transplantation. This scenario explains how Paul could know all the people he greets in Romans 16 without disconnecting it from the Roman letter. It also gives us clear insight into yet another way of planting the church of Jesus Christ.

### The Team Concept

The New Testament clearly demonstrates that God is a fan of apostolic workers laboring in teams, particularly in pairs. This is not *always* the case throughout Scripture, for Paul, Peter, Timothy, Titus, Epaphras, et al. labored in some places alone.<sup>31</sup> However, the general rule is that the work of God was accomplished by those who labored together.<sup>32</sup> Note the following:

- ✿ The twelve apostles are listed in pairs (Matt. 10:2–4).

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<sup>30</sup> See L. Ann Jervis's *The Purpose of Romans*; and Harry Gamble's *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans*.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 9:32ff.; 1 Thess. 3:2, 5; Col. 4:12–13; Titus 3:12; 2 Tim. 4:20.

<sup>32</sup> This does not imply that one of the workers was not in the "lead" when they traveled together. Paul, for instance, was the "chief speaker" when he and Barnabas labored together in Lystra (Acts 14:12).

- ✦ Jesus sent the Twelve out in pairs for a trial mission (Mark 6:7).
- ✦ Jesus sent the seventy-two out in pairs for a field assignment (Luke 10:1).
- ✦ The Twelve (minus Judas) are listed in pairs when Luke mentions them in the upper room (Acts 1:13).
- ✦ The Lord often sent a pair of His disciples to fulfill some task (Matt. 21:1; Luke 22:8).
- ✦ Peter and John worked together as a pair (Acts 3:1ff.; 4:1, 13ff.; 8:14ff.).
- ✦ Paul and Barnabas worked together as a pair (Acts 13—15:35).
- ✦ Barnabas and Mark worked together as a pair (Acts 15:39).
- ✦ Paul and Silas worked together as a pair (Acts 15:40).
- ✦ Paul sent pairs of men to serve in the work (Acts 19:22; 2 Cor. 8:16–18).

The above examples should not be misconstrued to be an artificial or mechanical method. Instead, the workers who traveled together grew up in organic church life with one another (Luke 22:8; John

20:2–3; and Acts 3:1). Traveling together was simply the natural impulse of spiritual life.

The team concept reflects the need for Christian workers to have peers. This prevents them from being self-styled lone rangers in God’s work. Although team ministry is a clear biblical pattern, we rarely see it in our day. I personally consider this to be one of the great shames and indictments of our age. While it may not always be possible or practical in every context, it should happen more than it does.

### Strategy for Spontaneous Expansion

There’s another point worth mentioning that has to do with Paul’s church-planting strategy.<sup>33</sup> Paul was an urban church planter. For the most part, he bypassed the rural areas and ignored the small communities.<sup>34</sup> Instead, he went directly to the major urban areas. He concentrated on planting indigenous churches in influential cities that had large populations.

It is for this reason that the word *pagan* has come to refer to non-Christian people. The word *pagan* is derived from the ancient word for *farmer*, which means country-dweller. (A similar etymology lies behind the word *heathen*. The heathens were those who lived on the “heath,” i.e., out in the country.)

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33 The exact strategy that the apostles used in their preaching to the lost is beyond the scope of this book. However, there were two major venues for it: the principle of the marketplace (Acts 17:17), where the gospel is preached to a heathen audience, and the principle of the synagogue (Acts 17:1–3), where the gospel is preached to a religious audience. While Paul’s calling was primarily to the Gentile (Gal. 2:7–9), he preached to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16). Conversely, while Peter’s calling was primarily to the Jew (Gal. 2:7–9), he preached to the Gentile as well (Acts 10:1ff.). There was, therefore, considerable overlap between the callings of the two men. Further, both men labored in Judea, Antioch, Corinth, Rome, Galatia, and Asia.

34 The exceptions are found in Derbe (a small town) and the surrounding regions around Lycaonia (Acts 14:6).

Christianity was rarely successful outside the cities of the ancient world. Because our faith is inherently relational, the church was unable to successfully take root outside of urban settings. In urban areas, Christians could see one another in their day-to-day lives and easily care for one another. In the countryside, believers were more isolated from each other. Therefore, they had a difficult time fleshing out the “one anothers” that the New Testament so often emphasizes. Consequently, Christianity has always been dominantly urban.

But Paul’s strategy in planting churches in large cities went beyond making it conducive for community life. It was also to allow the gospel to spread spontaneously (1 Thess. 1:8). An organic church, when properly functioning, will draw the lost by her sheer magnetism and charm. In the big city, where there’s no shortage of people who live in close proximity, this is feasible. But in the countryside, it’s far more difficult. Speaking of the “spontaneous expansion of the church,” Roland Allen writes,

*This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the church explaining to others the gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the church by the addition of new churches.<sup>35</sup>*

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35 Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 7.



Pisidian Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome were not sleepy little towns. They were strategic cities where spontaneous expansion could easily occur. On this score, F. F. Bruce remarks,

*So Paul traveled along the Roman highways, the main lines of communication, preaching the gospel and planting churches in strategic centres. From those centres the saving message would be disseminated.*<sup>36</sup>

Strikingly, to Paul's mind an entire province was evangelized if he planted a few churches in the central cities that belonged to it. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he and his coworkers had planted fewer than twenty churches in Galatia, Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome. Yet according to Paul, the gospel had been "fully preached" from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

In only ten years—with fewer than twenty Gentile churches on the planet—Paul felt that there was no further place for him to preach in the regions from Jerusalem to Rome (Rom. 15:19–24 KJV). As Donald Guthrie puts it,

*Turning to his immediate plans, he [Paul] makes the astonishing statement that he finds no further room for work in the regions just mentioned. This does not mean that the areas have been completely evangelized, for Paul's strategy was to plant churches in important centers and then to expect the developing churches to*

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36 F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 315.

*evangelize the surrounding district. Only by this means was he able to work in so many areas.*<sup>37</sup>

Church-planting strategy and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are not mutually exclusive. Because apostolic workers are sent by God,<sup>38</sup> the work they do belongs to God and not to them. Accordingly, the Lord orchestrates and pioneers His own work. He chooses where the gospel is to be preached and where His workers are to travel. He also engineers the timing when this should take place (Acts 10:9–11, 19–20; 13:2–4; 16:6–8; 18:8–11; 23:11; Gal. 2:2).

Apostles work in areas where a local church invites them or if they have received a revelation to go to a particular place. First-century workers were not strangers to the Lord's inward guidance (1 Cor. 2:7–16). After all, it is Jesus Christ who creates the church by His Spirit. Humans are but His instruments.

## Summary

To recap, the New Testament gives us four ways in which churches were planted in the first century and visible communities of God's kingdom were established. They are:

✦ *The Jerusalem Model*—A group of apostolic workers spends years raising up one large church. After a number of years, the church is transplanted into many different cities, thus

<sup>37</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 256.

<sup>38</sup> God is the One who sends workers (John 20:21; Acts 13:2; 1 Cor. 1:17). However, divine sending is typically manifested through a church, the representatives of a church, or by an older worker.

creating many new churches. The workers visit those new churches and lay fresh foundations for them.

- ✿ *The Antioch Model*—Apostolic workers are sent out from a local church to plant new churches in new cities. The workers leave those churches in their infancy but give periodic help and encouragement as they mature.
- ✿ *The Ephesian Model*—An older worker resides in a particular city to plant a new church and train younger workers. He then sends those workers out to plant new churches in nearby regions.
- ✿ *The Roman Model*—Christians from many different churches transplant themselves into a particular city to establish one new church.

Because these four models of church planting are God-given, I don't believe they can be improved upon. Ironically, it is rare to find many people observing them today. Along this line, Watchman Nee writes,

*Though today the places we visit and the conditions we meet may be vastly different from those of the Scripture record, yet in principle the experience of the first apostles may well serve as our example.... Christianity has lost*

*its original purity, and everything connected with it is in a false and confused state. Despite that fact, our work today is still the same as in the days of the early apostles—to found and build up local churches, the local expressions of the Body of Christ.*<sup>39</sup>

Roland Allen echoes the same sentiment, saying,

*Today if a man ventures to suggest that there may be something in the methods by which St. Paul attained such wonderful results worthy of our careful attention, and perhaps of our imitation, he is in danger of being accused of revolutionary tendencies.... All I can say is, "This is the way of Christ and His apostles." If any man answers, "That is out of date," or "Times have changed" ... I can only repeat, "This is the way of Christ and His apostles," and leave him to face that issue.*<sup>40</sup>

I wish that every person who feels called to plant churches would reexamine the principles of the New Testament and, with the Lord's leading, reclaim them.

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39 Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), 133.

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

# CHAPTER 2

## RESTORING THE ITINERANT WORKER

*No solution, no matter how creative or highpowered, can succeed if you have defined the problem incorrectly. Put differently: more important than giving the right answers is asking the right questions.... Simply changing the materials, programs, and activities is not enough. We must change how we perceive the church, how we see God expressing Himself in the world through the church, and how we do church.*

—William A. Beckham

In our last chapter, we explored the four ways in which churches were planted in the first century. All of them are hardly known today. While much is said these days about “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry,” there is often very little fleshing out of this principle in real life. The litmus test of such equipping is if the leader

could leave a local congregation on its own without any official leadership in place and it's capable of functioning in his absence. This is precisely what Paul of Tarsus did again and again with the churches he planted. By doing so, his gospel and his efforts to “equip” God's people were put to the test.

This brings us to a critical question. What are the scriptural ingredients for planting organic churches?

### **The Worker and the Work**

Virtually every church in the first century was given birth at the hands of an extralocal, itinerant worker who eventually left it on its own. (Note: The few churches mentioned in the New Testament that emerged without the direct aid of an itinerant worker were virtually always helped and encouraged by one after its birth.)

This person is known by the following names: “apostle,” “sent one,” “worker,” “foundation layer,” “church planter,” et al. Again, an apostle is someone who establishes churches. As William S. McBirnie says,

*Having traced their lives very carefully, from every scholarly source obtainable, this writer has concluded that without exception the one thing the apostles did was to build churches—not buildings of course, but congregations. As far as the record reveals, the apostles established a congregation.<sup>1</sup>*

The term *worker* is particularly favorable. Jesus used it in His messages (Matt. 9:37–38; 20:1–2; Luke 10:2, 7). Paul used it in his

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<sup>1</sup> William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973), 27–28.

letters (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1; 11:13; Col. 4:11). And Luke refers to the ministry of planting and nurturing local churches as “the work”:

*While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)*

*From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. (Acts 14:26)*

*But Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. (Acts 15:38)*

In discussing the careful distinction between the “the work” and “the church,” New Testament scholar Robert Banks writes,

*These two, the church and the work, should never be confused, as they generally have been in subsequent Christian thinking. Paul views his missionary operation not as an “ekklesia” but rather as something existing independently alongside the scattered Christian communities.... Its [the work’s] purpose is first the preaching of the gospel and the founding of churches, and then the provision of assistance so that they may reach maturity.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 168–69.

Watchman Nee adds,

*In the will of God, “the church” and “the work” follow two distinct lines. The work belongs to the apostles, while the churches belong to the local believers. The apostles are responsible for the work in any place, and the church is responsible for all the children of God there.<sup>3</sup>*

We will discuss the difference between the work and the church in a later chapter, as it’s a critical issue.

### Stewards of the Mystery

According to Scripture, an apostle is a “sent one.” He is a messenger. He’s an envoy *sent* to declare—to preach—a message, and to be a living witness to that message. And out of that message, a spiritual community is raised up by the Holy Spirit. Note the following passages:

*And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach. (Mark 3:14 KJV)*

*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. (1 Cor. 1:17)*

*And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that*

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<sup>3</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), 100.



*preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Rom. 10:15 KJV)*<sup>4</sup>

Because first-century workers were sent, they were itinerant. That is, they traveled. They were pioneers and explorers mostly on the move.<sup>5</sup> But that's not all. Christian workers held in their hands a stewardship. That stewardship was to articulate the mystery of God to His people (1 Cor. 4:1ff.). The "mystery," as Paul called it, is the consuming revelation of God's eternal purpose in Christ that burns in the hearts of all who have been genuinely sent.<sup>6</sup>

One of the worker's main tasks was to impart this revelation—or vision—to the Lord's people. As Proverbs says, "Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint" (29:18 ESV). Without a unified vision of the Lord and His ageless purpose, God's people disintegrate—they run amok—they fall apart. Without an internal "seeing" of Jesus Christ, they lose heart, motivation, purpose, and harmony.

A shared vision of Christ and of God's purpose in Him has sustaining power. It also produces unity. Such vision of the Lord is the only proper foundation upon which a church can be built.

One of the principal tasks of the Christian worker, then, was to preach to God's people the unsearchable riches of Christ beyond telling (Eph. 3:8). First-century workers had a matchless

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4 See also Acts 14:7, 21; 16:9–10; 20:24; Rom. 1:1, 9, 15–16; 2:16; 15:16, 19–20, 29; 16:25; 1 Cor. 4:15; 9:12, 16–18, 23; 15:1; 2 Cor. 2:12; 4:3–4; 10:14, 16; 11:7; Gal. 1:11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; 4:13; Eph. 1:13; 3:6; 6:19; Phil. 1:5, 7, 12, 17, 27; Col. 1:5, 23; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:2, 4, 8–9; 3:2; 2 Thess. 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:8.

5 While they sometimes took up temporary residence in various places, they consistently traveled and were mainly on the move.

6 For a detailed discussion of the mystery of God's eternal purpose, see my book *From Eternity to Here*.

revelation of Jesus Christ and the mystery of God's eternal purpose in Him. And they were able to articulate that purpose so that the Lord's people would be arrested by it. This was a major mark of Paul's ministry of planting churches. Consider the following passages:

*Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ. (Eph. 3:8–9 KJV)*

*And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel. (Eph. 6:19 KJV)*

*Praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds. (Col. 4:3 KJV; see also Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:9; Col. 1:26; 2:2)*

## **Spiritual Equippers**

One of the key roles of first-century Christian workers was to equip God's people to minister Christ to one another. R. Paul Stevens throws light on the phrase "to equip the saints" when he says,

*The Greek word for equipping, “katartismos,” is used as a noun only once—in Ephesians 4:12. But the word has an interesting medical history in classical Greek. To equip is to put a bone or a part of the human body into right relationship with the other parts of the body so that every part fits thoroughly.... A Greek doctor would “equip” a body by putting a bone back into its correct relationship with the other members of the body.<sup>7</sup>*

How exactly did apostolic workers equip the saints? How did they coordinate the various parts of the body of Christ so that each was empowered to function? Aside from supplying the church with a deep and profound presentation of Jesus Christ, there were a number of other ingredients involved. The following six are most important:

### (1) REMOVING THE SIN CONSCIOUSNESS

Organic churches have open-participatory meetings where each member shares something of the Lord with the rest of church. But one of the major obstacles that hinders believers from functioning in such meetings is the consciousness of sin. This is the sense of guilt. The sense of condemnation. The sense of unworthiness.

In the first century, the Christian worker’s task was to empower God’s people by setting them free from guilt. The worker did so by showing God’s people that they are blameless in God’s eyes. He showed them how God sees them in Christ, and that Christ’s shed

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7 R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity* (Vancouver, Canada: Regent, 2002), 25.

blood was enough to satisfy God's demands. He also provoked them to repent when necessary.

By preaching a gospel of unending grace, void of legalism, first-century workers armed God's people with a clean conscience—free from the consciousness of sin. This empowered the early Christians to open their mouths and boldly share the Lord with one another (Heb. 9:14; 10:1–25) as well as to the lost.

## (2) PROVIDING PRACTICAL TOOLS

The first-century Christian worker's message was Christ. Yet as he declared the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the worker had a responsibility to show God's people *how* to experience the Lord's glory by simple, doable means.

This element is vital because an organic church cannot be sustained unless the members are experiencing an ongoing, personal relationship with Christ. Herein lies one of the most important tasks of a Christian worker. He himself must have a fresh, living, ongoing, personal relationship with his Lord along with a knowledge of how to pass it on to others.

Point: Unless God's people are awakened to an indwelling Lord, they will never be able to sustain organic church life.

This brings us to the issue of leadership. A good definition of a leader is someone who knows the next step. This "knowing" is based on "seeing." Moses could not build the tabernacle without first following God and being shown the pattern from above. In the same way, first-century workers had great insight into God's ageless purpose. They possessed spiritual sight—the ability to see the unseen.

Paul, the model Christian worker, calls himself a “master builder” (1 Cor. 3:10 NASB). The Greek word translated “master builder” is *architekton*, from which our word *architect* is derived. This word refers to the spiritual gift that gives one the capacity to see how the different parts of God’s spiritual building fit together with the other parts.

An architect has the insight to see where the stairway fits into the living room, where the master bathroom will be located, how the plumbing should be laid out, where and when the electrical outlets should be installed, etc. It’s the same with those who build God’s spiritual house. As Melvin Hodges says,

*The church planter will be a man of vision. He will see possibilities where others only see obstacles. He will be highly motivated and persevere in spite of discouraging set-backs. His vision is backed up by a solid faith that God has sent him to do this work and will see him through. Most churches are established because of the vision, spiritual burden, sacrifice, and perseverance of some individual who gave himself to the task of church planting.<sup>8</sup>*

In a word, first-century workers were those who followed the Lord wholeheartedly, saw the next step, and had the ability to show God’s people how to take it. They were gifted not only in imparting vision, but also in catalyzing others to work together toward fulfilling it.

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8 Melvin L. Hodges, *A Guide to Church Planting* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 30–31.

### (3) INSTILLING CONFIDENCE IN SPIRITUAL GIFTINGS

Without confidence, the people of God will stay muted and passive. Throughout Paul's letters, he reiterates again and again the confidence that he had in the believers and in their abilities (Gal. 5:10; 2 Thess. 3:4; 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:16; 8:22; Rom. 15:14; Phil. 1:6).

First-century workers demonstrated confidence in God's work in the church. Instilling such confidence in the Lord's people helped empower them to function and serve. It's the same way with Christian workers today. They are confident in the Holy Spirit and in God's people—all of whom are anointed by the Spirit.

### (4) MODELING BY EXAMPLE

As vital as the above ministry is to church formation, the *example* that a Christian worker sets before God's people is of great importance. A church is equipped not only by preaching, but also by modeling. First-century workers modeled what they preached by their own example. Paul often makes mention of this aspect in his letters:

*Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. (Phil. 3:17)*

*Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed*

*the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.  
(1 Thess. 1:5–6)*

*For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our  
example. We were not idle when we were with you.  
(2 Thess. 3:7)*

*In everything set them an example by doing what  
is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness.  
(Titus 2:7)*

*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.  
(1 Cor. 11:1)*

Obviously, this doesn't mean that workers are perfect and free from making mistakes. Peter is the summary witness that apostles are fallen people who make mistakes—sometimes very big ones.<sup>9</sup> It rather has to do with their character, which is evidenced by their consistent patterns of behavior.

From reading Paul's letters carefully, we get the distinct impression that Paul modeled how the church was to take care of its members and love the lost. He modeled how the members were to fellowship with the Lord and pray for one another. He modeled how they were to handle problems, worship, and live by the Lord's indwelling life.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter obstructed the Lord's plans on numerous occasions, he disowned Jesus three times, and he yielded to human pressure when the truth was at stake (John 18:10; Luke 22:51; Matt. 16:22; 26:69ff.; Gal. 2:11ff.). Yet the New Testament consistently regards him as a great apostle (Mark 16:7; John 21:15ff.; Acts 1—12; 1 Cor. 15:5).

It's not enough to simply teach and preach these things; modeling them before God's people is just as critical.

#### (5) REMOVING FOREIGN ELEMENTS

Another way that workers help God's people to function is by *preventing* foreign elements from entering into the church to choke its life and distort its natural features. Perhaps an illustration will help explain this aspect.

An admirer once asked Michelangelo how he sculpted the famous statue of David that now sits in Florence, Italy. Michelangelo responded by offering this simple explanation: "I first fixed my attention on the slab of raw marble. I studied it, and then I chipped away all that wasn't David."

Michelangelo's description can be applied to how apostolic workers plant and sustain churches. *One of the major goals of those who plant churches is to remove everything that isn't Jesus Christ.* Apostolic workers not only built a rock-solid foundation of Christ, but they were also careful to remove everything that was not Christ.

#### (6) DEFYING ENTROPY

One thing that will kill the functioning of the body of Christ is entropy. Entropy is the natural breakdown and disintegration that occurs in all life-forms. Things that are left to themselves tend toward entropy. But entropy not only applies to physical life systems; it also applies to Christian community.

In time, entropy degrades every human enterprise. We all run out of steam over time. The persistent energy that is required to



keep a group of Christians moving forward without an institutional structure can be quite taxing.

When entropy sets into an organic church, the type A personalities begin to fill the vacuum. This is the pattern of church history. Because of the powerful force of entropy, the early church moved from an organic, shared-life community to a hierarchal, one up/one down, top-heavy organization.

First-century workers withstood the inevitable force of entropy. They recentered and reenergized the church toward Christ and gave it fresh direction. This is yet another way in which church planters equip God's people to function and keep the church afloat.

### **How God Produces Apostolic Workers**

Perhaps one of the least understood principles of the work of God today is that itinerant workers always emerged from the soil of an existing church. They were people who were given a unique revelation of Christ and of God's eternal purpose in Him. They were well acquainted with the mystery of God. And they were specially equipped to articulate that mystery to others (Eph. 1:9; 3:2–11; Col. 1:24–29). But beyond all this, a Christian worker learned all of these spiritual realities in the context of an existing organic church where he was a nonleader.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, a large part of a worker's preparation for service is to live in the context of an organic church *before* he is sent out. It is within this rare setting that the Christian worker both experiences and learns the spiritual and practical realities of body life.

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<sup>10</sup> Such a person may be raised up by God to be an elder in an organic church before he is sent out to the work, but that will not be immediate. Paul and Barnabas were prophets and/or teachers in the church in Antioch before they were sent out from that church to labor apostolically (Acts 13:1–2).

Consequently, first-century workers didn't leave the synagogue on Saturday and start planting churches on Sunday. *They first experienced that which they were sent out to begin.* This principle is critical. And aspiring "church planters" who have never lived a day in the context of an authentic organic church should take serious heed to it.

A seminary education cannot equip a person to raise up the church of the living God—nor can any position in an institutional church or Bible study group. Only time spent in an organic expression of the body of Christ can equip a person for such work.

To frame it another way, you cannot produce that which you have never experienced. What is more, the gore and glory—the testing and transforming—the sifting and soaring—the brokenness and beautifying—the exposure and enlargement that organic church life affords are vital for preparing those who are called to God's work.

Thus, to blithely launch out to plant an organic church without such preparation is sheer folly. And it reflects a profound misunderstanding of God's ways. The exacting nature of body life is designed to prevent would-be workers from becoming clergy-on-wheels who lord over the Lord's people like distant bosses. Living in organic church life as a nonleader is designed to produce brokenness and humility. It's designed to make workers safe to God's people. (One of the major marks of spiritual safety is that workers have peers.) It's also designed to equip them so they know what they are doing in raising up the house of God. Put differently, in God's work, it is not only the method that's important. The person is just as critical. As Watchman Nee says,

*We must realize clearly that even though we adopt apostolic methods, unless we have apostolic consecration,*

*apostolic faith and apostolic power, we shall still fail to see apostolic results. We dare not underestimate the value of apostolic methods—they are absolutely essential if we are to have apostolic fruits—but we must not overlook the need of apostolic spirituality, and we must not fear apostolic persecution.*<sup>11</sup>

## Helpers in the Work

The New Testament is crystal clear that not all Christians are called to apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 12:28ff.). However, many are called and gifted to *assist* in the apostolic work. We have already seen that Paul had a number of “coworkers” who also planted churches. Yet in addition to these coapostles, Paul had a group of men and women who assisted him in his work.<sup>12</sup>

Some were undoubtedly prophets and teachers; others may not have been. But all of them had a heart for the Lord’s work and were willing to serve in whatever capacity they could. Among them were: John Mark, Onesiphorus, Sosthenes, Erastus, Urbanus, Priscilla and Aquila, Crescens, Onesimus, Philemon, Archippus, and Phoebe.

In addition, Peter and Paul often had a supporting team to accommodate them on their trips (Acts 10:23; 11:12; 12:25; 15:2). Unfortunately, some Christians have the misguided idea that being

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<sup>11</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), 36.

<sup>12</sup> There were other men and women whom Paul regarded as “workers,” “coworkers,” and “fellow-workers.” These people were in addition to the men Paul trained in Ephesus. Among them were: Apollos, Barnabas, Silas, Demas, Jesus called Justus, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Artemas, Clement, Euodia, Syntyche, Andronicus, and Junia. For details, see the following articles in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993): “Church Order and Government,” 136–37; and “Paul and His Coworkers,” 183–89.

a church planter is the “end-all-be-all” of being a Christian. Such a romanticized notion of being a Christian worker is both tragic and foolish.

Just because some people are not called to plant churches does not mean that they are second-class Christians. Hardly. As stated above, the people who assisted Paul had a heart for God’s work and were very much involved with it. In fact, the work could not have advanced without them.

The truth is that there are many gifts in the body of Christ beyond that of apostles that are just as valuable to the Lord: Prophets, teachers, evangelists, helpers, exhorters, and those who show mercy are just a few of them (Eph. 4:11ff.; 1 Cor. 12:28ff.; Rom. 12:4ff.).

In the traditional church system, those who feel “called” of God are given three main options for ministry. You prepare to be either a pastor, a missionary, or a worship leader. But this restricted view of ministry is not biblical. And I believe it unwittingly forces many “called” Christians into a job description that God never intended.

In the same way, the New Testament doesn’t support the idea that there are church planters and then the rest of the body of Christ. Not at all. There are many different giftings and ministries, which all work together to produce and build up the church of the living God.

### **A Challenge to All Church Planters**

Perhaps some of you believe that apostles no longer exist. Without a doubt, the twelve apostles hold a unique place in God’s economy (Luke 22:30; Rev. 21:14).<sup>13</sup>

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13 The Twelve would include Matthias, who replaced Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:26).

Yet Scripture mentions other apostles beyond the Twelve. Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:1–6); James, the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:19); and Timothy and Silas (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6) are just some of the apostles who appear throughout the pages of the New Testament. Apostolic *ministry*, therefore, continued beyond the death of the original Twelve. It did not pass away after the first century. Neither was it transmitted formally through an institutional hierarchy.

While apostles are not writing Scripture today, they are still divinely commissioned to build the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11). The chief work of an apostle is to raise up churches. This does not mean that a church cannot be birthed without the hand of an apostle. The churches of Syrian Antioch, Caesarea, Tyre, and Ptolemais do not appear to have been founded by one.

But all of these churches received help from an apostolic worker shortly after their births. Again, *every church in the New Testament was either planted or greatly helped by an apostolic worker.*

Apostolic workers aren’t called to establish missions, denominations, cell groups, parachurch organizations, or institutional “churches.” They are called to plant *ekklelesias* that are grounded and sustained by Jesus Christ—the Chief Architect of the church (1 Cor. 3:6–15).

Whether you believe that apostles exist today or not, there’s no doubt that there are those who are still gifted to plant, equip, and nurture Christian communities. So if you don’t like the word *apostle*, simply replace it with *church planter* or *itinerant worker*.

I’m convinced that Paul of Tarsus best modeled how the church of the living God should be planted. I see no evidence that the way he raised up churches was tied to his culture. As we will see in the

next chapter, I believe it was tied to the unchanging nature of God Himself.

It happened like this: An apostolic team walks into a town. They are willing to be spit on, stomped on, buried, and burned. They endure the worst conditions known to humanity (2 Cor. 11:23ff.; 6:4–10; Acts 13—25). But as long as they have breath in their lungs, they continue to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and raise up God's house.

What's motivating them in the face of such odds? They have been given a large dose of Jesus Christ. They have been overwhelmed by a vision of Christ and of God's ultimate passion for a bride, a building, a body, and a family. That vision burns in them. It consumes their very lives. In everything they do, the love of Christ compels them (2 Cor. 5:14).

The apostles lead some people to the Lord. They call men and women to repent, to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, and they (or their associates) baptize the new converts. The majority of these people are Gentiles, whose lifestyle is one of extreme immorality and decadence. They worship false gods. They have never heard of Abraham, Moses, or Jesus. They are heathens—sinful to the core.

The apostles then spend an average of six months with these new converts. They give them the fellowship of the body of Christ. They show them how to have a living, ongoing experience with an indwelling Lord. They teach them how to worship, how to meet, and how to care for one another's needs. They show them how to live by the life of Christ. They instruct them on how to have daily fellowship with the Lord and how to bring that fellowship into their homes,

sharing it with one another in open-participatory meetings without stale ritual and without human headship.

The new church is born in glory. It's birthed in an explosion of freedom and joy. In only six months' time, the apostles convince these ex-pagans that they are holy in Christ. Their preaching produces an avalanche of heavenly glory.

After six months of drowning these new converts with an intoxicating unveiling of the Lord Jesus and their place in Him, the apostles leave the new church on its own. They leave it without any oversight, supervision, leadership, or administration.<sup>14</sup> They not only leave the church in its infancy, but they also leave it in a dangerously vulnerable position. You see, the church is living in a town that has utterly rejected these new Christians. They are social outcasts. They have been ostracized from their own culture and from their own people. And yet, the apostles leave them to the Holy Spirit and to the headship of the resurrected Christ.

Now ponder that scenario for a few moments.

And ask yourself: *Can I do that?*

Can you turn a group of heathen, immoral pagans into full-pledged Christians in six months? Can you present Jesus Christ in such profound depths that you can leave God's people awash with a sighting of His glorious face? Can you give the church a birth in heavenly glory, joy, and freedom? Do you possess that kind of high-octane, explosive, life-changing gospel? Can you show a group of new Christians how to have ongoing, daily fellowship with Christ and minister Him in its gatherings without a human being leading

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<sup>14</sup> Not all the churches that Paul planted had elders. But in those churches that did have elders, the elders always emerged much later. And they grew up organically. They were never present in the beginning.

or facilitating? Can you show them how to live by an indwelling Lord, out of which everything else flows? Can you teach them how to worship in homes without static ritual? Can you keep the church of the living God moving forward without resorting to legalism and without installing an organizational structure to control it? And when problems arise, can you handle them with the compassion, wisdom, and patience of Jesus Christ?

Can you do these things? If not, I will simply say to you that this is what has to be done if the Lord will see His dream fulfilled.

It is my conviction that all of the above is necessary if we are going to see a restoration of organic church life, which matches the heart of God. This brings us squarely to the issue of preparation. What does the New Testament teach about the preparation of an apostolic worker?



# CHAPTER 3

## THE MASTER PLAN OF CHURCH PLANTING

*The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it.*

—Chinese proverb

How were church planters prepared for their ministry in the first century?<sup>1</sup> Watchman Nee aptly writes,

*Unless the man is right, right methods will be of no use to him or to his work.... In God's work everything depends upon the kind of worker sent out and the kind of convert produced.<sup>2</sup>*

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1 I owe many of the insights in this chapter to Robert Coleman's *The Master Plan of Evangelism*; A. B. Bruce's *The Training of the Twelve*; Stanley Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God*; Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Church Life*; Gene Edwards' *Overlooked Christianity*; and David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman's *Creating Communities of the Kingdom*.

2 Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), xvii.

These words are as profound as they are true. And they go straight to the heart of God’s method of raising up Christian workers. To paraphrase Nee, men look for methods, but God looks for men.<sup>3</sup>

Many contemporary Christians become highly enthused when they hear of a fancy new “method” or “scheme” to apply to God’s work. But God is far more concerned with *the person* than He is with *the method*.

The Lord has a unique way of preparing His servants for His work. It’s one that involves transformation. And transformation always involves emptying, suffering, and loss. Humanity’s way is to hand you a method. Divinity’s way is to hand you a cross.

### A Root in Eternity

To understand how God prepares itinerant workers, we must begin at the starting point of the Christian life: eternity past. The pattern of the Christian life, the pattern of the church, and the pattern of church planting all have their roots in the triune God before time.

Before creation, there existed only God—a transcendent community of three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Based on what we know from the New Testament, there were three things occurring within the Godhead in the dateless past.

- ✿ An exchange of divine life.
- ✿ An exchange of divine fellowship.
- ✿ A divine purpose to enlarge the life and fellowship to a creation called “humanity.”

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3 “Men” here includes women also. I’m using it to refer to “mankind” or “humankind.”

Let me unfold that a bit.

First, the three Persons of the Godhead enjoyed an eternal exchange of divine life. The essence of that life is love. So within the Trinitarian Community, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit engaged in a divine dance of passionate and unconditional love for one another.

God is a community of perfect, mutual love. And this love is the very fountainhead of the divine nature (1 John 4:8, 16). For this reason, love is the essence of the Christian life. So we can say that the Christian life finds its roots in the Godhead in the dateless past (John 13:34–35; 17:23–25; Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8–10; 1 Tim. 1:5).

Second, the divine community enjoyed an eternal fellowship (Prov. 8:22–31; John 1:1–3, 18; 15:26; 17:5). The Father, Son, and Spirit mutually experienced what the New Testament calls *koinonia* (the shared life of the Spirit). *Koinonia* is the essence of organic church life. Biblically speaking, the church is a shared-life community whose members mutually fellowship with God and with one another (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 John 1:3).

Consequently, the most primitive expression of the *ekklesia* is found in the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit before time. We can say, then, that the church finds its origins in the Godhead in the timeless past. Theologian Stanley Grenz puts it this way,

*As the doctrine of the Trinity asserts, throughout all eternity God is community, namely the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who comprise the triune God. The creation of humankind in the Divine*

*image, therefore, can mean nothing less than that humans express the relational dynamic of God whose representation we are called to be.... The focus of this present experience, according to the New Testament writers, is the community of Christ.*<sup>4</sup>

Understanding that the church flows out of the Godhead removes it from the world of human methodology. Church renewal, then, is not a matter of finding a new style, a new method, or a new structure. It's a matter of participating in God's life (2 Peter 1:4).

Third, the members of the Godhead counseled together and conceived an eternal purpose. They shrouded this purpose in a mystery, and they hid it in the Son until an appointed time (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9–11; 3:3–11). What was that purpose? It was that the Trinitarian Community would one day expand its fellowship to others (John 17:20–26; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:15; 3:3–6; Col. 1:25–27; 3:11).

Herein lies the essence of apostolic work. It is to enlarge the circle of divine life and fellowship to human beings. When men and women are brought to Christ and organic churches are born, the divine fellowship is expanded. Properly understood, the church is a human community that lives by divine life and participates in and reflects the divine fellowship (John 6:57; Gal. 2:20; 2 Peter 1:4). As Stuart Murray says,

*This story is the story of community. The Trinity,  
God in community, reaches out in creation and in*

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 179.

*redemption to form a human community to participate in the Divine community... Church planting is about establishing new communities of faith.<sup>5</sup>*

Stanley Grenz expands this point by saying,

*Throughout eternity God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the community of love. More specifically, the dynamic of the Trinity is the love shared between the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit. God’s purpose is to bring glory to His own triune nature by establishing a reconciled creation in which humans reflect the reality of the Creator. The triune God desires that human beings be brought together into a fellowship of reconciliation, which not only reflects God’s own eternal essence, but actually participates in His nature (2 Peter 1:4).*

So it’s within the eternal Godhead that we find the headwaters of the Christian life (divine life), the headwaters of organic church life (divine fellowship), and the headwaters of apostolic work (the divine plan of enlarging the life and fellowship that exists within the Godhead). R. Paul Stevens puts it beautifully when he writes,

*There was ministry before there was a world, ministry in the being of God.... Ministry is God’s ministry, arising from the communal life of God, the Father,*

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5 Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 170.

*Son and Spirit ministering love to one another even before there was a world to save.<sup>6</sup>*

## A Conception in Nazareth

It is in Jesus of Nazareth that we have the first glance of the Christian life lived on planet earth. At an appointed time the Son of God stepped out of the heavenly portals of glory and became a man. Born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, Jesus embodied God's eternal thought for humanity. (This is the meaning of the Lord's oft-used title "Son of Man.")

With the advent of the Lord Jesus on earth, what had its root in eternity past was conceived in a carpenter's shop in the ill-reputed town of Nazareth (John 1:46). It was in that carpenter's shop that God the Father taught Jesus three things (Luke 2:40, 49, 52; 4:16):

- ✦ To live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✦ To experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✦ To enlarge the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work).

Let's unpack each point.

First, the Father taught His Son how to live by divine love (John 5:19–20, 26, 30; 7:16; 8:26, 28; 10:37–38; 12:49–50; 14:10). This

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<sup>6</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 1999), 141, 143.

is essentially the Christian life. The Christian life is a life lived by God's own life.

The Son showed forth God's idea for humanity. In God's thought, humans are God-created beings who are called to live by His life and express His love. The Son, therefore, brought to earth the unconditional love that He knew before His incarnation.

In this way, Jesus Christ expressed the image of God as a human. He revealed to men and angels how humans are to live: by the life of God. Very simply, Jesus Christ lived by means of His Father's indwelling life (John 6:57).<sup>7</sup>

Second, the Father taught the Son how to fellowship with Him as a man. In the days of His flesh, the Lord Jesus learned to fellowship with His Father internally.

As a man, Jesus Christ continued the divine *koinonia* that He once knew in eternity past. In Jesus, humanity had fellowship with divinity. For the first time a human being was brought into vital participation with the divine community. In this way, Jesus Christ incarnated God's purpose for humanity.

Third, the Father trained the Son how to be the first apostolic worker (John 4:34; 9:4; Heb. 3:1). Jesus learned from His Father how to build His church, the very organism that He would later give His life for (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 5:25).

Amazingly, Jesus did not learn how to build the church at the hands of religious specialists. The would-be scribes of His day formally studied the Hebrew Scriptures, the oral traditions, and the rabbinical commentaries under tutors. The would-be priests went

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<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, the way most modern believers are taught to live the Christian life is a poor fit to the way Christ demonstrated how to live it. Jesus did not try to be good; He lived by the indwelling life of His Father.

off to master the rituals of their sacred trade in Jerusalem. But Jesus learned how to be the first Christian worker as a blue-collar laborer in a lowly carpenter shop.

Jesus knew no seminary, no human tutors, and no academic program. Instead, He learned to fellowship with His Father, love His Father, obey His Father, and receive His Father's teaching amid the splinters and sawdust that lay amid a "layman's" workplace.

Therefore, what had its root within the Godhead in eternity past was conceived in the life of the Nazarene carpenter. The Christian life, the church, and apostolic work were all experienced within the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. What God the Son knew in His eternal state was brought to earth without being altered, edited, or changed. The heavenly music that He sang in eternity was transposed from the divine key to the human key. But the song remained the same.

### **An Embryo in Galilee**

As arresting as it may sound, it took the Father approximately thirty years to prepare His Son to be the first apostolic worker. The Lord Jesus did not begin His earthly ministry until He was empowered by the Spirit at about age thirty (Luke 3:22–23). This occurred at His baptism in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:16–17). Jesus Christ did no preaching, teaching, or healing before that time (Luke 4:1, 16–18).

Thus the Father *called* Jesus Christ, *prepared* Him for thirty years, and finally *sent* Him to accomplish His work.<sup>8</sup> As we will shortly see, being *called*, *prepared*, and *sent* is an unbroken spiritual principle that consistently runs throughout the New Testament narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Granted, following His earthly ministry, our Lord accomplished His greatest work at Calvary. But because the scope of this chapter is our Lord's earthly life and ministry, we will not deal with His atoning work—which is unique to Him alone.



Let me insert a few words about calling and sending. A call to God's work is a call to divine service. It's not a call to meet a human need. And that call should be followed by a sending.

All genuine Christian workers should be sent. This implies that they do not take the initiative in God's work. Nor do they take it into their own hands. Those who take up God's work who aren't sent are volunteers. And God knows no volunteers when it comes to His work. There's a huge difference between a person who is *sent* and a person who *went*. I believe the Lord is raising up a new breed of Christian workers who will wait on their calling and their sending.

A worker's calling should be confirmed by representative members of the body of Christ who send him or her out. This principle keeps workers from being freelancing lone rangers in the kingdom of God.

Again, the word *apostle* in Greek literally means "one who is sent." All throughout the book of John, Jesus says that He is sent (4:34; 5:23–24, 30, 36–38; 6:29, 44, 57). The book of Hebrews calls Jesus an apostle (3:1). In fact, Jesus was the first apostle.

The sending of the Son holds tremendous significance for all who are called to God's work today. If Jesus, the first Christian worker, was sent, how much more should all workers after Him be sent? Watchman Nee eloquently observes,

*The tragedy in Christian work today is that so many workers have simply gone out, they have not been sent. It is Divine commission that constitutes the call to Divine work. Personal desire, friendly persuasions, the advice of one's elders and the urge of opportunity—all*

*these are factors on the natural plane, and they can never take the place of a spiritual call.... A Divine call gives God His rightful place, for it recognizes Him as the Originator of the work.*<sup>9</sup>

Let's now look at the Twelve. Shortly after Jesus began His earthly ministry, He *called* twelve men to work with Him (Matt. 4:19–21; 9:9; Mark 1:19–21; Luke 6:13). He *prepared* them for it. And He finally *sent* them to carry it out (Mark 3:13–14). So as the Father called, prepared, and sent the Son—so the Son called, prepared, and sent the Twelve (John 17:18).<sup>10</sup>

How did the Lord Jesus prepare the Twelve after He called them? The short answer is that He prepared them the same way that His Father prepared Him. There were essentially three leading elements in the Son's training of the Twelve. And they run parallel with what happened both in Nazareth and in eternity past. Jesus Christ taught the Twelve:

- ✦ How to live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✦ How to experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✦ How to expand the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work).

<sup>9</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), 21–22.

<sup>10</sup> There was also a band of women who followed the Lord along with the Twelve (Luke 8:2–3). It must be remembered, then, that women were part of the Galilean experience also.

Let's take a look at each of the above.

First, Jesus taught the Twelve how to live the Christian life. The essential ingredients in this teaching lay in the words “He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14).

The Twelve lived with the Son of God. Day in and day out, they watched Him draw His life from His indwelling Father. They beheld the incomparable manner in which He denied Himself and poured out His life for others. They marveled at His peerless words, awed at His matchless compassion, wondered at His sagacious handling of criticism, studied His gracious responses to persecution, and scrutinized His heartfelt praying. As A. B. Bruce says,

*In the training of the twelve for the work of apostleship, hearing and seeing the words and works of Christ necessarily occupied an important place. Eye and ear witnessing of the facts of an unparalleled life was an indispensable preparation for future witness-bearing.*<sup>11</sup>

In short, the Twelve watched a Man live by divine life. And this “watching” didn't take place from the sidelines. It happened in the heart of the playing field as the Twelve *lived* in the presence of the Son of God.

In this way, Jesus' mode of pedagogy represents a dramatic break with today's data-transfer model of teaching, where information is sterilely passed from one notebook to another. The Lord's way of

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11 A. B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2000), 41.

training produces transformed disciples, while the modern method breeds isolated consumers of mental information.

Second, Jesus introduced the Twelve to the life of the church. That is, they learned to fellowship with Jesus and with one another in informal settings. They sat at His feet and listened to His words in homes, on seashores, along dusty roads, on mountaintops, and around campfires—asking Him questions and responding to His inquiries (Mark 4:10, 34; 7:17; Luke 8:9; 9:18; 11:1; John 6:3; 9:2). The Twelve consistently enjoyed table fellowship with one another while breaking bread with the Son of God in their midst (Matt. 26:26; Luke 24:41–43).

Interestingly, these activities are the chief features of the first church that was born a few years afterward (Acts 2:42). Hence, the primitive simplicity that the Twelve enjoyed with Jesus in Galilee was the embryo of the *ekklesia*. It was a foreshadowing of what was to come: humanity participating in the fellowship of divinity with Jesus Christ as Head. In a word, what happened in Galilee with Jesus and the Twelve was the embryonic experience of organic church life.

Third, the Lord trained the Twelve to be apostles—those who would found Christian communities. What did that training consist of? It certainly was not what natural minds would suspect. Contrary to the modern-day practice of preparing men and women for “the ministry,” the Twelve did very little spiritual service while Jesus was on earth.

Granted, they had two trial missions that presumably lasted only a few weeks (Mark 6:7ff.; Luke 10:1ff.). They returned afterward and reported their experiences and received the Lord’s feedback (Mark 6:30; Luke 9:10; 10:17ff.). However, the bulk of the Twelve’s

activities consisted of mundane tasks like distributing food to hungry multitudes, managing housing arrangements for the Lord's itinerant ministry, baptizing new converts, and preparing food for their journeys.

Jesus taught the Twelve how to fulfill God's work by modeling it before them daily. By His example, the Lord showed them the practical matters of prayer, service, self-denial, healing, showing compassion, handling conflict, and addressing questions. But the most important part of their training rested in their experience of corporate life under the Lord's direct headship.

Note that the Twelve not only lived with Jesus, but they also lived with one another. And through their experience of communal living, the Twelve were exposed. The carnality lurking in the shadows of their hearts surfaced as their wills collided. The dark sides of their personalities were laid bare as the Twelve chafed against one another (Matt. 8:25–26; 17:19–20; Mark 6:52; 10:13–14, 35–37, 41; 14:29–30; 16:14; Luke 9:46, 54; 22:24).

Jesus cut through their preconceived notions. Like a fine surgeon, He ripped into their souls and disclosed their ulterior motives. He dealt with their eccentricities. He rearranged their thinking about God, about the kingdom, about power, and about one another. He also taught them a great deal about each subject.

It was in that three-year period of living in an intense, shared-life community with Jesus Christ as Center that the Twelve were exposed, tried, and broken. It was within that corporate context that they learned the priceless lessons of relatedness, forbearance, patience, long-suffering, humility, forgiveness, dependence, and compassion. (Such lessons exact an obscenely high price.)

The Galilean experience was on-the-job training for the Twelve. The magnificent texture of that experience eventually qualified a dozen deeply fallen men to be useful in the Master's hands (Judas Iscariot being the exception). In short, the Galilean embryo of the church became the divine training ground for the Twelve. For this reason, the Galilean experience should never be underestimated. It establishes a pattern that will not move. Again, Robert Coleman writes,

*Amazing as it may seem, all Jesus did to teach these men his way was to draw them close to himself. He was his own school and curriculum.... The time which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others that it can only be regarded as a deliberate strategy. He actually spent more time with his disciples than with everybody else in the world put together. He ate with them, slept with them, and talked with them for the most part of his entire active ministry.... One must not overlook that even while Jesus was ministering to others, the disciples were always there with him.... Without any fanfare and unnoticed by the world, Jesus was saying that he had been training men to be his witnesses after he had gone, and his method of doing it was simply by being "with them."<sup>12</sup>*

I personally don't think we can improve upon Galilee in the training of young workers. Every man and woman who is called of

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12 Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1993), 41, 45–46.

the Lord to His work needs a Galilee in his or her experience. What Jesus Christ did with the Twelve is a reflection of God's way of raising up Christian workers.

### **A Birth in Jerusalem**

After three years of living with and beholding the Son of God, the Twelve were sent by Jesus to begin their ministry of planting churches (Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:21). The twelve *disciples* became the twelve *apostles*—“sent ones.”

After His resurrection, Christ breathed into the Twelve the very life that indwelt His own being. And twelve uneducated Galileans received an indwelling Lord (John 20:22). Once the Lord Jesus had fully prepared the Twelve, He left them on their own (John 14:28). In reality, however, He didn't leave them alone. He instead abandoned them to the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

Hence, the Christ who they had once fellowshiped with in person had now come to dwell in them by the Spirit (John 14:16–18; 16:13–16). And just as Jesus Christ lived by an indwelling Father, the Twelve began to live by an indwelling Son. The passage had moved from the Father to the Son—then from the Son to the Twelve (John 17:18; 20:21).

On the day of Pentecost the church was birthed in Jerusalem, and three thousand souls were quickly added to it. The stewardship of God had now passed into the hands of the Twelve. The twelve apostles raised up the Jerusalem church by declaring Jesus Christ to unregenerate Jews and showing them how to live by His indwelling life.

Galilee had expanded into Jerusalem. And the Twelve passed on to the new converts in Jerusalem the same fellowship they had known

with the Son of God—which was the same fellowship that the Son had known with His Father on earth as well as before creation (Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1–3). For the first time, the church—the expanded community of divine life and fellowship—was born on earth. Theologian Clark Pinnock writes,

*The church is meant to resemble the triune life by being itself a place of reciprocity and self-giving. The fellowship that we have with one another is related ultimately to our fellowship with Father and Son (1 John 1:3)... Fellowship refers to Divine life and to community life, because the community is meant to reflect the community of the Trinity, which is the ontological basis of the church.*<sup>13</sup>

R. Paul Stevens puts it this way:

*God who is community of Father, Son, and Spirit has created a community that expresses God's love life on earth.*<sup>14</sup>

Over the next four years, the Lord began to secure a number of men in the Jerusalem church for His work. These men were exposed, broken, tried, and unwittingly trained in the corporate context of body life. And they began to surface as fit vessels in the Master's hands.

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<sup>13</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 117.

<sup>14</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 1999), 62.



Among this company were James (the Lord's brother), Stephen, Philip, Agabus, Silas, Judas, and Barnabas. These men emerged on the stage of the first-century drama as people who would later engage in itinerant ministry. (Barnabas, Silas, and James would later become apostles themselves.)

Notwithstanding, all of these men did not engage in Christian work until they first received years of experience in the church at Jerusalem. Thus the trek that these seven men walked mapped perfectly with that of the Twelve in Galilee. To summarize, the Twelve taught the believers in Jerusalem the following:

- ✿ How to live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✿ How to experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✿ How to expand the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work—particularly in relation to Barnabas, Silas, and James; Philip was an evangelist and Agabus a prophet).

### **A Walk in the Aegean World**

What began inside the Godhead in eternity past was conceived within one Man in Nazareth. It developed as an embryo within a group of twelve men in Galilee. And it was born in the midst of three thousand converts in Jerusalem.

Yet this same principle continues unbroken throughout the pages of the New Testament. More than a decade after his conversion, Paul

of Tarsus was sent out by the Holy Spirit along with Barnabas to the work of planting churches. And as was the case with all the workers who preceded them, Paul and Barnabas had spent a considerable amount of time learning Christ in the context of organic church life. That experience preceded their “being sent” to itinerant work. (Before they were sent, Barnabas had spent about eleven years in the Jerusalem assembly. Paul had spent about five years in the Antioch assembly.)<sup>15</sup>

In addition, just as Barnabas was prepared by living with and observing the Twelve in Jerusalem, Paul was prepared by living with and observing Barnabas in Antioch.<sup>16</sup> Both Paul and Barnabas were clearly *called* by God to His work. In his letters, Paul repeatedly testifies that he was called to be an apostle (Gal. 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). The New Testament is quite clear that Barnabas was also an apostle (Acts 14:3–4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:5–6).

Paul and Barnabas stood in a long lineage of itinerant workers who were called, prepared, and then sent. Interestingly, just as the *Father* sent the Son ... and just as the *Son* sent the Twelve ... so the *Spirit* sent Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:4). And it is the Spirit who still sends workers today.

In short, the Twelve taught Barnabas the following:

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15 In Antioch, Paul quickly matured to be a prophet/teacher along with Barnabas (Acts 13:1). Apostles, therefore, are first brothers. They then grow to manifest their gifts as prophets or teachers or evangelists, etc. They are then sent out to use their gifts to plant churches. Not all prophets, teachers, and evangelists become apostles (“sent ones”). But apostles are often prophets, teachers, and/or evangelists before they are sent.

16 This seems clear from the fact that the more experienced Barnabas searched for Saul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch to help with the work there (Acts 11:25ff.). Also, Luke makes clear by his wording that Barnabas took the lead ahead of Paul until the two men got to Paphos (Acts 13:13, 42–43, et al.). Before this point, Luke always mentions Barnabas’s name ahead of Paul’s. Afterward, he always says “Paul and Barnabas.” See F. F. Bruce, *The Pauline Circle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 18–19; Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs* (Richmond, VA: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), 135–41.

- ✿ How to live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✿ How to experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✿ How to expand the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work).

And Barnabas taught Paul the following:

- ✿ How to live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✿ How to experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✿ How to expand the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work).

Later, Paul traveled with Silas to plant churches in Greece (Acts 15—18). Like Paul and Barnabas, Silas was called to the work, he was prepared in the Jerusalem church along with Barnabas, and he was sent. The New Testament makes clear that Silas (also called Silvanus) was also an apostle (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6).

### **Galilee Is Duplicated in Ephesus**

This principle of being called, prepared, and sent didn't end with Paul, Barnabas, or Silas. Paul raised up churches in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor (Acts 13—20). He modeled

the Christian life to his new converts (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 2 Thess. 3:7–9). And he trained those who were called to be apostolic workers (Acts 20:1–4; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 2:1–2).

In his later years, Paul trained young workers in the city of Ephesus in the same way that Jesus trained the Twelve in Galilee. In effect, Paul duplicated the Galilean experience of Jesus and the twelve apostles in the city of Ephesus. David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman write,

*Paul's strategy for leadership training is not unlike that of Jesus.... Every church planter should do the same.... This needs to be a foundational commitment of every church planter: plant churches and train others to do the same.*<sup>17</sup>

Note that each man whom Paul trained experienced organic church life first as a brother and not as a leader or a minister. To be more specific:

- ✦ Titus lived in organic church life in Antioch, Syria, for a period of years.
- ✦ Timothy lived in organic church life in Lystra for a period of years.
- ✦ Gaius lived in organic church life in Derbe for a period of years.

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<sup>17</sup> David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 157–58.

- ✿ Aristarchus lived in organic church life in Thessalonica for a period of years.
- ✿ Secundus lived in organic church life in Thessalonica for a period of years.
- ✿ Sopator lived in organic church life in Berea for a period of years.
- ✿ Tychicus lived in organic church life in Ephesus for a period of years.
- ✿ Trophimus lived in organic church life in Ephesus for a period of years.

This was their spiritual preparation. These eight men watched an apostle raise up a church bare-handed in the great city of Ephesus.

If you recall, the Twelve whom Jesus trained learned by “being with” and “beholding” the Lord (Mark 3:14; John 1:14; 1 John 1:1–3). So, too, the eight men whom Paul trained learned in the same way (Acts 19:1—20:4). Again, David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman observe,

*For several years, Timothy learned from Paul by watching him work and by assisting him in his work. He was with Paul in Philippi when they met with Lydia and the women at the river... He witnessed Paul being beaten and imprisoned, and he saw God's miraculous intervention in the earthquake... In all these experiences Timothy watched Paul and worked*

*with him. He “saw” and “did” ministry in partnership with Paul not only in Philippi, but in subsequent church planting in other cities.*<sup>18</sup>

As was true in Paul’s own life, the men Paul trained were: (1) *called* by God, (2) *prepared* in the context of organic church life, and (3) *sent* by the Spirit through Paul himself (Acts 16:1–3; 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Thess. 3:1–2). To be more specific, Paul’s eight apprentices learned the following from Paul and from the churches in which they lived. They learned:

- ✦ How to live by divine life (the Christian life).
- ✦ How to experience the fellowship of the divine community (organic church life).
- ✦ How to expand the divine life and fellowship to others (apostolic work).

Thus the divine principle of being called, prepared, and sent unshakably holds throughout the entire New Testament. It’s a consistent line that’s rooted in the Godhead before time. It was brought to earth by Jesus and moved from Jesus all the way to Paul and his coworkers. The pattern cannot be broken. And in my opinion, we are unwise to presume that we can improve upon it.

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<sup>18</sup> David Shenk and Ervin Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 152.

# CHAPTER 4

## APOSTOLIC COVERING VS. APOSTOLIC HELP

*Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most pick themselves up and hurry on as if nothing had happened.*

—Winston Churchill

In this chapter, we will explore the anatomy of apostolic authority. The commission of an apostolic worker is *personal*. But his sending out must be *corporate*. An apostolic worker is usually a teacher, prophet, or evangelist who has been directly called by God to a regional work. He has also been publicly sent out by a local group of believers.

It's this inward commission and outward sending that constitute one an apostle. Workers can also be sent out by the hand of an older worker who mentors them (1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Cor. 8:16–23; 12:18; Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–8; 1 Thess. 3:1–2; 2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12–13).

Again, the Greek word *apostolos*, often translated “apostle,” literally means one who is sent forth. Therefore, the New Testament knows nothing of a *self*-appointed, *self*-anointed, *self*-sent apostle.

Apostolic workers, in the New Testament sense, are itinerant, mobile, translocal people who critique the culture, proclaim the gospel, and plant and nurture *ekklelesias*. Just how they accomplish these tasks and how much authority they wield are questions that we’ll consider in this chapter.

### The Question of Apostolic Covering

In *Reimagining Church*, I discuss in detail the notion of spiritual and “denominational covering.” Similar to “denominational covering,” but having a flair all of its own, is the notion of “apostolic covering.”

According to this teaching, a church is protected from doctrinal error if it submits to a contemporary apostle. It rests upon the idea that apostolic workers have official authority to control and direct the affairs of a church.

The Bible, however, runs contrary to this idea. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find an apostle assuming the full responsibility of a local church once the foundation has been fully laid. Rather, the apostles of the New Testament both recognized and respected the spiritual autonomy of each church once it was established.

Granted, the church was in the hands of the apostle while he was laying the foundation. But the responsibility fell into the hands of the whole church once he departed. *And he always departed.*

In the beginning of a church’s life, the burden of oversight belongs to the apostolic worker or apostolic team. It then shifts to the elders once they emerge. Apostolic workers are responsible for



their own regional ministries. But the church is responsible for its own local affairs.

Again, when an apostolic worker is giving birth to a church, the church is in his hands. Such a period can be likened to an incubation phase. The worker spends time ministering Christ to the believers and equipping them for ministry. While under house arrest, Paul was able to rent his own home to conduct apostolic meetings in Rome alongside the meetings of the church (Acts 28:30–31).

Paul did something similar when he was in Ephesus. He held apostolic meetings in the Hall of Tyrannus, while the local believers gathered in homes (Acts 19:9; 20:20; 1 Cor. 16:19). Such apostolic meetings were meetings of *the work*. And they were designed to equip the saints to function as *the church*. Yet once the worker laid the foundation and left the church on its own, he transferred all oversight and responsibility into the hands of the local believers.

While Paul sometimes spent an extended length of time to plant a church (Corinth—eighteen months; Ephesus—three years), he always left the churches on their own once the foundation was established. And after leaving, he didn't meddle in the church's affairs—though he was always available to help and encourage.

In like manner, Antioch served as Paul's home base for his first two apostolic journeys. Yet he didn't dominate the church's affairs while there. In Antioch, Paul was simply a respected brother with a recognized gift of teaching and preaching. He was not an apostle to that church.

This explains why the New Testament mentions the elders of Ephesus, the elders of Jerusalem, the overseers of Philippi, etc. But it never mentions the apostles of these places. While the Twelve resided

in Jerusalem as a home base for their ministry during the initial season of the church's existence, the New Testament never calls them "the apostles *of* Jerusalem."

Again, the apostolic ministry, or "the work," exists as a separate entity from the churches. The work is regional. The churches are local. The work is transient. The churches are settled. The work is a roving association. The churches are resident communities. Apostolic workers are travelers, not settlers. They are pioneers, not stationaries.

Typically, Paul would spend several months establishing the ground floor of a believing community, only to leave it to itself for lengthy periods of time. While away from the church, he was available to offer advice (1 Cor. 7:1). He also made periodic visits to check on its progress and to strengthen its life (Acts 15:36; 18:23; 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1). However, he never took charge of its affairs. (More on that later.)

The practice of leaving churches in their infancy reveals the daunting fact that Paul believed the church to be a living organism that would develop on its own by the power of God's life. He knew how to plant a church in such a way that when he left it, the Spirit would remain active within the community.

At the same time, the churches that Paul planted received help from other churches (Acts 16:2; 1 Thess. 1:7–8). They also stayed in steady contact with Paul. In fact, even after twelve years, the church in Philippi still needed the spiritual assistance of their founding apostle (Phil. 1:23–27).

There is massive confusion today among Christians between "the work" and "the church." As we have already seen, the two are distinct

and must be kept along their own respective lines. For example, when church leaders teach that every Christian is a “missionary” and that the goal of a local church is to break up and create many new churches, which in turn, should create many other new churches, then the church is being co-opted by the work. The truth is, not all Christians are sent out to the apostolic work (see chapter 1) and not all are called to be apostles (1 Cor. 12:28ff.; Eph. 4:11ff.).

Also, when a Christian worker sets up his home base in a local church and dominates its life and ministry, then the work has taken over the church. The church becomes nothing more than an extension of the worker’s own ministry. As long as he is resident and very involved, there will be an unhealthy mingling of the church and the work. The church, in effect, becomes the franchise of the worker.

The work exists for the churches—not for its own sake. In fact, the work produces the churches. At the same time, the churches produce workers in time. The work is never to rival, substitute, or overshadow the church. The goal of the work is to establish and strengthen the churches. So the church—which is the corporate expression of Jesus Christ in a given locale—is both the goal and the means of God’s grand mission.<sup>1</sup> God desires to fill the earth with His Son (Eph. 1:10, 23; 4:10). The way He does this is by giving birth to organic Christian communities by means of the apostolic work.

In a word, apostolic workers are responsible for planting and nurturing churches in many different places. Genuine apostolic workers never permanently settle down in the churches they plant. Nor do they assume exclusive authority over them.

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is fully developed in my book *From Eternity to Here*.

## Church Planters or Church Supplanters?

Although the early apostles were valued servants to the early churches, they were not usurpers (1 Cor. 4:1). They didn't conduct themselves as resident chairmen or distant bosses over God's people.

Put another way, first-century apostles were church *planters*—not *supplanters*. They were assistants, not spiritual aristocrats. Servants, not ecclesiastical despots. Foundation layers, not high-powered celebrity figures. While first-century apostles instructed and persuaded the churches, they never controlled them.

While some today have glamorized the apostolic vocation, Paul considered apostles to be the “last of all ... fools ... weak ... without honor ... the scum of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Cor. 4:9–13 NASB). True workers, therefore, are not glory-grabbers. They do not seek to impress people (2 Cor. 11:5–6; 1 Thess. 2:5–6). They do not seek financial gain (2 Cor. 2:17; 11:9). Nor do they dominate the lives of others (2 Cor. 1:24).

True workers don't claim impressive credentials (2 Cor. 3:1–3). They do not assert a superior heritage (2 Cor. 11:21–22). Nor do they boast of extraordinary spiritual experiences (2 Cor. 10:12–15; 11:16–19; 12:1, 12).

For Paul, apostolic workers are not self-appointed, self-advancing, spiritual elitists. Rather, they are those who shovel the dung after the procession ends. They spill their blood for God's house.

The grabbing of power and the exertion of oneself over others is not apostleship (“sent-ness”). It's just another stale, warmed-over version of oppression. Real workers are first and foremost servants.

Consequently, instead of deploying imperial metaphors, Paul draws metaphors from the family to describe his relationship to the

churches he worked with. To the churches, Paul is a father, a mother, and a nurse (1 Cor. 3:2; 4:14–15; 2 Cor. 12:14; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7, 11), not a lord, a master, or a king.

Likewise, the persuasive overtones that permeate Paul's letters show that he treated the churches as a father would treat his *adult* children as opposed to his toddlers. As a spiritual father, he gave his judgment on church affairs. But he didn't issue unilateral decrees.

In effect, the churches that Paul planted progressively moved away from dependence upon him. They rather grew in their dependence upon Christ (1 Cor. 2:1–5). And Paul urged them in this path (1 Cor. 14:20; Eph. 4:14).

### **The Pauline Pattern**

One of the most dynamic features of Paul's pattern of church planting was his consistent subjection to other Christians. From the outset of his conversion, Paul learned to depend upon his fellow brethren. His first lesson of subjection to the body was with Ananias. Ananias was the brother at whose hands Paul received the Spirit and a confirmation of his calling (Acts 9:17–19; 22:12–16).

Subsequently, Paul was sent away by the believers in Berea (Acts 17:14). He was strengthened by his collaborators in Corinth (Acts 18:5). He was restrained by the saints at Ephesus (Acts 19:30). He was also advised by the brothers in Jerusalem (Acts 21:23). In a word, Paul knew how to receive help and enrichment from other Christians (Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 16:18; Phil. 2:19; 2 Tim. 1:16).

While he was certainly endowed with a seasoned spiritual history and many powerful gifts, Paul regarded his authority as functional

and relational—not official or sacral. For Paul, spiritual authority was rooted in the Lord’s approval, not in some formal office (2 Cor. 10:18).

This explains why Paul virtually always sought to *persuade* the churches concerning God’s mind rather than issuing imperial commands. In fact, Paul’s two favorite words for addressing the saints are *parakalein* and *erotao*. *Parakalein* means an appeal. *Erotao* means a request made between equals.

In the same strain, Paul refrained from using the very strong word *epitage* (commandment) to charge obedience to himself (1 Cor. 7:6, 25; 2 Cor. 8:8; Philem. 8–9).

When Paul called the believers to action or attitude, we find him “urging,” “beseeching,” “pleading,” “appealing,” and “asking” rather than issuing authoritarian decrees. Paul’s letters are dripping with this kind of cooperative tone (Rom. 12:1; 15:30; 16:2, 17; 1 Cor. 1:10; 4:16; 16:12, 15; 2 Cor. 2:8; 5:20; 6:1; 8:6; 9:5; 10:1–2; 12:18; Gal. 4:12; Eph. 3:13; 4:1; Phil. 4:2–3; 1 Thess. 2:3, 11; 4:1, 10; 5:12, 14; 2 Thess. 2:1; 3:14–15; 1 Tim. 1:3; 2:1; Philem. 9–10, 14).

To Paul’s mind, the voluntary consent of his audience and their internalization of truth were far more desirable than nominal obedience to the things he wrote. At times when his tone was needfully sharp, Paul charged the believers to commend obedience to Christ rather than to himself (Rom. 1:5; 16:19, 26; 2 Cor. 2:9; Phil. 2:12).

On rare occasions he did charge (*paraggello*) obedience to the things that he had written (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 10, 14). But the object of obedience was not Paul as a person. It was Christ whose mind he was expressing at the time.

Put another way, whenever Paul manifested the mind of Christ, his words were *authoritative*. But Paul himself was never *authoritarian*. Consider the following texts:

*And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord. (1 Cor. 7:10 KJV)*

*If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. (1 Cor. 14:37 KJV)*

*For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ. (2 Cor. 2:17 KJV)*

*For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor. 4:5 KJV, see also 2 Cor. 11:19; 13:3–4; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:2, 15; 2 Thess. 3:12)*

So Paul was not an authoritarian personality. Nor was he an independent freelancer. From his own lips, he made clear that he didn't regard his apostolic calling a license to dominate the affairs of the churches. And Paul never exploited his right as an apostle to receive financial help from those he served (1 Cor. 9:1–19).

In fact, his abiding principle was to refuse funds from those churches that he was serving at the time. Paul accepted money only

from believers in other locales so as not to burden those who were recipients of his immediate help (2 Cor. 11:7–9).

In effect, Paul's whole outlook of apostolic authority is crystallized in the statement "Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy" (2 Cor. 1:24 NKJV). Eugene Peterson paraphrases this passage as follows: "We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours" (MSG). In this way, Paul differed immeasurably from his opponents (2 Cor. 11:19–21).

### **The Source of Paul's Authority**

The authority that Paul possessed was tied to his ability to speak the word of the Lord to the communities he founded. This is why it was an authority designed to build up rather than to tear down (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). Paul, therefore, always exercised authority for the sole purpose for which it was given—to edify the saints. He never misused it to gain prominence, earthly power, or material advantage.

Paul recognized that the source of his authority was Christ Himself as He is embodied in the gospel. This explains why he consistently invited the churches to judge what he said (1 Cor. 10:15; 11:13; 1 Thess. 5:21). Paul even urged them to reject his message if it was not consistent with the gospel (Gal. 1:8–9).

In like manner, the New Testament authors as a whole consistently exhort the churches to obey the raw truth of the gospel as it is found in Jesus Christ. The words of mere humans are not to be obeyed at face value (Rom. 6:17; Gal. 3:1; 5:7; Titus 1:14).



Paul expected the churches to give him a hearing insofar as his words reflected the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:9) and insofar as they were in harmony with the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 7:40). Indeed, Paul was forced to reprove the churches on occasion. But he always found this difficult to do.

His reticence for giving rebuke is disclosed in his Corinthian correspondence. There we discover that Paul preferred to approach God's people with a spirit of gentleness rather than with a word of reproof (1 Cor. 4:21b). Yet when he had to address them sternly, he did so with much anguish of heart (2 Cor. 2:4).<sup>2</sup> Paul's love for the Corinthians was so overflowing with fatherly compassion that after he wrote them, he feared that his words may have been too strong (2 Cor. 7:8). Clearly, the consuming motivation that drove Paul to labor tirelessly and suffer for the churches was his surpassing love for God's people (2 Cor. 12:15; Phil. 2:17–21; Col. 1:24; 1 Thess. 2:8).

Because Paul often spoke the word of the Lord, he could say that those who rejected his words did not reject him but Christ (1 Thess. 4:8)—for to Paul's mind, “God has given us His Holy Spirit” (4:8b NKJV). Yet even in those times when the word of the Lord was in his mouth, Paul wanted the believers to acknowledge that what he said was the Lord's thoughts rather than his own (1 Cor. 14:37–38). The fact that Paul appealed to his faithful service as a basis for the saints' trust is unmistakable (1 Cor. 4:1–5; 7:25; 15:10; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:1–2). Such service was an example to the churches (1 Cor. 4:16; Gal. 4:12; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:7).

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Paul's “rod” in 1 Cor. 4:21 (KJV) is a metaphor for a word of rebuke rather than a token of forced subordination or unilateral authority (2 Cor. 10:3–6).

All of these facts embody the following sound insight: The *source* of spiritual authority is Christ. The *means* of spiritual authority is the Word of God. The *exercise* of spiritual authority is brokenness and servanthood. And the *goal* of spiritual authority is edification.

In God's thought, authority and the spirit of the cross go hand in hand. This principle is exhibited throughout Paul's apostolic ministry.

It should be understood that the canonical (biblical) writings penned by Paul and the other apostles are inspired and authoritative in their own right. They embody God's voice in Holy Scripture. In this chapter, however, we have been looking at Paul's writings with an eye to understanding the relationship between a worker and a church. When we look at Paul's letters through this lens, we discover that he was nonauthoritarian.

Granted, God gave Paul the responsibility to care for the churches he planted in multiple ways. But he was noncontrolling and noncoercive in all of them. As Robert Banks says,

*Paul exercises authority among his communities by persuading them to accept his point of view. He does not try to coerce his converts. His persuasion is based on his capacity to convince them, by word and example, that he desires for them only what the gospel requires. . . . Through the Spirit, God continues to speak and work authoritatively, not through coercion of people's personalities but by convincing their minds of truth and warming their hearts with love so that they freely embrace it.*

## To Whom Does the Church Belong?

In all that Paul did to care for and protect a church, he acted in the capacity of a spiritual father and mother. Consider his words:

*But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.... For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2:7–12)*

*And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. (2 Cor. 12:14 NKJV)*

Yet even though Paul took fatherly/motherly responsibility to care for the churches he established, he didn't see them as his franchise. Judging from the New Testament epistles, whenever Paul wrote to a church, he never once stated or implied that he had formal possession of it. The churches "belong" to God, to Christ, and to the believers. A church only belonged to Paul in the sense that children belong to their parents. Consider the following:

### *Galatians*

☛ Paul says the church belongs to Christ twice.

- ✦ He says the church belongs to the family of believers once.
- ✦ He calls the church “brethren” eleven times.
- ✦ He describes himself as a mother who has travailed in birth for the church.

### *1 Thessalonians*

- ✦ Paul calls the church “brethren” seventeen times.
- ✦ He says he treated the members as a father treats his children.
- ✦ He says that he was gentle among them as a mother is with her children.

### *2 Thessalonians*

- ✦ Paul calls the church “brethren” seven times.

### *1 Corinthians*

- ✦ Paul calls the church “brethren” twenty-eight times.
- ✦ He says the church belongs to God twice.
- ✦ He says the church belongs to Christ once.
- ✦ He calls the members his children.
- ✦ He says he belongs to them.
- ✦ He says he is a servant to them.

- ✿ He uses the imagery of a mother who fed them with milk.
- ✿ He says that he is their only father who gave them birth through the gospel.

### *2 Corinthians*

- ✿ Paul calls the church “brethren” eight times.
- ✿ He calls the members his children.
- ✿ He says he stored up for them as parents do for their children.
- ✿ He says he is a father who will present the church to Christ as a chaste virgin.
- ✿ He says he is not a lord over them, but a helper of their joy.

### *Romans*

- ✿ He calls the church “brethren” fourteen times.
- ✿ He says the members belong to Christ.

### *Colossians*

- ✿ He calls the church “brethren” two times.

### *Ephesians*

- ✿ He calls the church “brethren” two times.

### *Philippians*

- ✿ He calls the church “brethren” eight times.

## The Nonauthoritarianism of Other Apostles

Timothy was as nonauthoritarian as Paul. Paul never gave his young coworker license to exert formal power over the saints. He rather encouraged Timothy to “exhort” them in meekness. Paul also instructed Timothy to cultivate a family-like relationship with the church (1 Tim. 5:1–2; 2 Tim. 2:24–25; 4:2).

In one place, Paul instructs Timothy with the words “These things command [*paraggello*] and teach” (1 Tim. 4:11 KJV). But the things that Paul exhorts Timothy to “command” are the words of the Holy Spirit (4:1). And they are informed by sound teaching (4:6). Like Paul, Timothy worked *with*, not *over*, God’s people.

Paul’s admonition to Titus is similar. In Titus 2:15, Paul’s charge to “teach, exhort, and reprove these things with all authority [*epitage*]” is to be understood against the backdrop of his earlier injunction. That injunction was: “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1 NASB). In other words, Titus was free to authoritatively speak, reprove, and exhort those things that mirror the sound teaching of Jesus Christ. (For authority is vested in the latter.)

The letters of John breathe the same nonauthoritarian air. Like Paul, John didn’t meddle in church affairs. Nor did he claim a right to rule the saints. When Diotrephes was usurping authority in one church, John did not seek to force him out. He rather exhorted the saints not to follow those who do evil (3 John 9–11).

John concedes that he has no commandment to give (1 John 2:7; 2 John 5–6). Instead, he points to Christ’s new commandment—which

is love. In all these ways, John's outlook on authority is parallel with Paul's.

Again, the inescapable conclusion in all this is that apostolic workers do not have official authority over churches. They do not assume formal possession of them. Nor do they turn them into franchises (or virtual denominations) of their own peculiar ministries.

Apostolic workers, if authentic, use their ministries to serve the churches. They do not use the churches to build their ministries.

The ministry of the first-century apostle, then, was a service rather than an expression of dominance. This is why Paul referred to the churches he planted in explicitly nonhierarchical terms. He called them "brethren" and "partners" in ministry (2 Cor. 5:20—6:1; 7:3; Phil. 1:5, 7; 2:17). When he spoke to them, he spoke as one of their own—as an equal. He did not speak as one who was above or over them (1 Cor. 5:2–3; Col. 2:5).

In this way, New Testament apostles did not control the churches. Neither did the churches control the apostles. Paul's words in Galatians 4:12 capture the thrust of his cooperative and relational mind-set: "Become as I am, for I also have become as you are" (NASB).

### **Paul's Confidence in the Churches**

Paul had great confidence in the churches he planted. He was confident that they would function properly in his absence. Consider the following texts:

*I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view. (Gal. 5:10 NASB)*

*We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.*  
(2 Thess. 3:4)

*I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy.* (2 Cor. 2:3)

*I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.*  
(2 Cor. 7:16; see also 2 Cor. 8:22; Rom. 15:14; Philem. 21; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 6:9)

Even in the midst of the chaotic meetings at Corinth, Paul never once put a choke hold on the church's open-participatory gatherings. Nor did he prohibit the brethren from exercising their gifts. Rather, he gave them broad guidelines to facilitate the orderliness of their meetings. And he trusted that they would adhere to them (1 Cor. 14:1ff.).

Paul had complete confidence in his ministry. So much so that he trusted the churches to have open-participatory meetings without any human officiation—including his own. In this way, Paul built well. He worked toward equipping the saints to function in his absence.

### **Paul's Relationship with His Coworkers**

Let's shift our attention to Paul's relationship with his coworkers. How did Paul treat those who were part of his apostolic team?

Spiritual authority was expressed within the sphere of apostolic work. And Paul was the center of his apostolic band. (Note that Paul and the other workers were not independent freelancers. They always



moved in association with a circle of collaborators. This is virtually never the case with today's self-advancing "apostles.")

Paul clearly took responsibility for the direction of the work. He also had no problem administering the movements of his coworkers (Acts 16:1–4, 9–10; 17:15; 19:21–22; 20:3–5, 13–15; 1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Cor. 8:18–23; Eph. 6:21–22; Phil. 2:19, 23, 25, 28; Col. 4:8–9; 2 Tim. 4:9–13, 20–22; Titus 1:5; 3:12–13). Yet a fixed hierarchical system did not work among Paul's company. Paul was not the president or CEO of the work.

For this reason we never see Paul demanding his collaborators to thoughtless obedience. As with the churches, Paul sought the voluntary consent of his colleagues whenever he made a request of them (1 Cor. 16:10–12; 2 Cor. 8:6, 16–18; 9:5; 12:18; Phil. 2:22–23).

At times, Paul subjected himself to the wishes of his fellow workers (1 Cor. 16:12). He also allowed room for them to disagree with him (Acts 15:36–41). The sending of Titus mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8:17 underscores the participatory relationship that Paul had with his coworkers: "For he [Titus] not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord" (NASB).

Paul took the lead in the sphere of his apostolic work simply because he was more spiritually advanced than his coworkers. It was not because he had a higher position in the ecclesiastical pyramid. Cooperation rather than authoritarianism marked Paul's dealings with his collaborators.

Because Paul exerted spiritual authority in the work, subjection in Paul's circle was voluntary and personal. It was never formal or official. Strikingly, Paul didn't regard the original Twelve as having some sort of hierarchical authority over him. Nor did he have any

regard for “apostolic” status (Gal. 2:6–9). Recall that on one occasion, Paul rebuked one of the most prominent apostles in public when an essential truth was at stake (Gal. 2:11–21).

### **Apostles Are Dependent on the Body**

The notion that holds that apostolic workers have ruling authority over local churches is untenable. So is the idea that some workers have official authority over other workers. These ideas are inventions of natural minds, and they are dissonant with Paul’s actual practice.

Apostolic workers, just like all other ministries in the body of Christ, are dependent upon the body to receive Christ’s fullness. This is clear from Paul’s opening words to the Romans. There he states that he is eager not only to bless them by his gifts (1:11), but also to receive help through theirs (1:12; 15:32).

We do well to remember that God always condemns independence and individualism. Dependence upon God never renders us independent of one another. The Lord doesn’t permit His people to “do what is right in their own eyes” (Deut. 12:8). And “he who separates himself seeks his own way and quarrels against all sound wisdom” (Prov. 18:1).

God, therefore, has not consigned any of us, including workers, into a little cubicle of our own existence where we may choose our own way. Those who conceive of their relationship with the Lord as wholly vertical (“me and Jesus alone”) are deceived and fulfill the words of the sage: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel” (Prov. 12:15 NASB).

No matter how spiritual a Christian may be, he or she is never exempted from his or her need for the spiritual supply of his or her

brothers and sisters in Christ. For even the mighty Moses needed the help of Aaron and Hur to strengthen his hands in the evil day (Ex. 17:10–13).

Of course, all that has been said is not tantamount to denying that apostolic workers do possess spiritual authority. They do. But again, spiritual authority is something far different from positional/hierarchical authority.

In the Lord, authority exists. But it's attached to function, not office. There is a tremendous difference between responding to function and responding to office. Office separates brethren. But Spirit-bestowed function builds them together.

As we have seen, Paul's letters clearly display a nonauthoritarian mind at work. They are also saturated with a cooperative tone. Yet because many modern Christians come to the New Testament with the preconceived idea that apostles have tremendous delegated authority, they miss the nonauthoritarian strain that liberally flows from Paul's pen. For this reason, today's popular notion of apostolic authority is unquestionably non-Pauline.

### **Apostolic Ministry Today**

There is no shortage of self-styled, self-appointed, self-anointed, post-Pauline “apostles” running to and fro in the body of Christ today. Such people issue authoritarian decrees, claim followers, and build empires. As a result, many discerning Christians have concluded that apostles do not exist anymore.

Let it be known, however, that God has raised up genuine apostolic workers in this century. These are those who have walked—and are walking—in a Pauline spirit. Like Paul, these workers are not

interested in building Christian empires nor in starting movements. Neither do they have any interest in reaching celebrity status or protecting their legacies (1 Cor. 1:13; 3:7, 21).

What, then, does a contemporary apostolic worker look like? If you are part of the institutional church scene, you may have never seen one. Yes, you have undoubtedly seen those who claim to be apostles. At the very least, you have heard of men who had the word *apostle* wrapped around them by others. Yet such men frequently lack the goods of a genuine worker.

By contrast, authentic workers are those who *hide* themselves rather than *hustle* themselves. Their work is largely unseen; their service frequently unnoticed. Real workers do not build denominations, programs, missions, buildings, or parachurch organizations. They exclusively build the *ekklesia* of Jesus Christ. And God uses the humble in heart to build His house (Isa. 66:1–2).

What is more, they don't go around announcing that they are apostles. In fact, there's a very good chance they don't even like this term. And since they aren't part of the latest spiritual fads, you won't find them belonging to any organized church or movement. Nor will you (normally) find them in the Christian tabloids.

While they are less in number than the extravagant and conspicuous "super-apostles" of our time, true workers are making deeper inroads toward God's eternal purpose in Christ. This is because they are building His church in His way.

All of this translates into the following simple prescription: Christians should be *cognizant* of their need for apostolic ministry, *generous* in their support of apostolic workers, yet *cautious* of those claiming to have apostolic status.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE MODERN HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

*Without a burning vision of the Lord's way, and the urge of the Spirit to obey, any pattern will remain but an empty sham.*

—John W. Kennedy

We live in a day where there exists a “primitive church phenomenon.” Countless Christians around the globe are seeing afresh that the modern practice of “church” is biblically groundless and spiritually ineffective. As a result, many are leaving the institutional church and are seeking to return to simpler forms of church life.

Some have dubbed this phenomenon “the house church movement.” But this is a misnomer for two reasons. First, it places the emphasis on the wrong thing—the house. Granted, the location of the church meeting is not without significance. But what God is after goes far beyond where His people meet. To put it bluntly, there

is nothing inherently magical about meeting in a home. While a case can be made that gathering in homes is often superior to gathering in basilicas, it's not the hallmark of the church.

Second, the word *movement* conveys a unified motion among a group of people. The fact is, there are about as many types of house churches as there are varieties of plants. Those who meet in homes contain every stripe of Christian and represent every doctrinal pedigree imaginable. Consequently, there exists no monolithic movement that reflects all house churches. For these reasons, the phrase “house church movement” is misleading. House churches gather for many different reasons and focus on many different things. And these differences are so great that they place many house churches galaxies apart.

While I rejoice that countless believers are pursuing the Lord outside of institutional church structures, it is my conviction that many such churches need guidance in making Christ the center of their church lives.

### **Subcultures of House Church**

According to my experience, most of the groups that fly under the flag of “house church,” “simple church,” or “New Testament church” fit neatly into one of the following categories:

*The Glorified Bible Study.* This brand of house church is typically chaired by an ex-clergyman or aspiring Bible teacher. That person usually facilitates a roundtable discussion of the Scriptures. Meetings are dominated by Bible expositions, which often descend into fruitless debates. In the glorified Bible study, those members who are not theologically inclined have a rather thin participation. Whether

they recognize it or not, the person facilitating the Bible study is in charge of the church.

*The Special Interest Group.* These home groups make their focal point of gathering a common interest like homeschool, home birth, the keeping of Jewish feasts, a particular eschatological (end times) view, a *pro forma* pattern of church service, organic farming, personal prophecy, “Holy Ghost laughter,” evangelism, or some other issue, fad, or thing—even “house church” itself.

*The Institutional Home Church.* This is simply a traditional church that meets in a house. A pastor leads it, a church service is followed religiously, a worship leader is in place, etc. The only difference is that the membership is smaller and the gathering place is a home instead of a building. I have a friend who describes such groups by the line “Honey, I shrunk the church!”

*The Personality Cult.* Members of these groups center their universe around a gifted person. It may be a dead apostle whose writings act as the exclusive medium for the group’s identity, beliefs, and practices. More often, the object of attention is a Christian leader who founds the church and perpetually stays resident within it. (Or it’s a leader who has welded together a movement to which the church belongs.) While the gifted personality often has a genuine desire to see the body build itself up, his controlling personality obstructs this spiritual dynamic. He is typically blind to the fact that he has unwittingly fostered an unhealthy dependence upon himself. Others can see this quite clearly, except for those who are part of the movement. They are oblivious to it.

*The Bless-Me Club.* At bottom, this is a narcissistic community—a spiritual ghetto. The meetings are insular and ingrown. The group

functions as a spiritual fueling station for burned-out Christians in need of an emotional fix. Churches of this ilk are dominated by navel-gazing individualists. People come together to eat and “hang out” each week. Most meetings are no more than “supperfests.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus Christ is not the centrality of the group, and an understanding of God’s eternal purpose is anemic at best. In addition, members typically bail out whenever the group faces a rough thicket. When conflict or dry spells occur, many (including those who were most zealous about the idea of “house church”) end up being lured back to the polish and flair of the program-driven traditional church.

*The Socially Amorphous Party.* These home groups are typically comprised of four to eight people who nebulously meet in a living room to chat over tea and cookies. They rarely attain critical mass due to a lack of vision and purpose. They like to speak bulbously about Jesus being present whenever “two or three are gathered together.” However, they usually fold before they even begin to understand why they exist. If they don’t fold, their meetings become progressively sterile as the years roll by.

*The Disgruntled Malcontent Society.* Comprised of ex-church derelicts and recycled Christians, these groups happily assemble to lick their wounds and slam the “spiritually abusive” institutional church. Their meetings are permeated with an atmosphere of pessimism, cynicism, and veiled bitterness. Tragically, after the members tire of attacking the organized church, they begin to chew up one another. Thus they find themselves taken by the same

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<sup>1</sup> In the beginning of an organic church plant, having meals together is recommended. But the church should eventually grow into something more than a weekly supperfest.



spirit they set out to oppose. This form of house church attracts Christians who are deeply wounded and have never learned to trust others.

*The Unwritten Liturgy Driven Church.* These groups clearly stand outside the stream of traditional Christianity. But they often do not meet in a home. Many gather in a rented building or a “meeting hall.” The dominating weakness of their gatherings is the lurking presence of an unwritten liturgy. The ironclad liturgy, which is practiced perfunctorily every week, is never questioned, challenged, or changed. In fact, if the order of worship is broken in any way, the leadership of the church will call the violators on the carpet to reprove them for their irreverence.

*The Organic Church.* This is a living, vibrant, face-to-face community that has no other pursuit but Jesus Christ Himself. Members are being “built together” into Christ the Head, they are experiencing the cross of Jesus, they are discovering how to live by His indwelling life, and they are fleshing out the biblical vision that the church is the family of God. Such churches are a testimony to the world, to one another, and to principalities and powers that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed alive—alive enough to be Head over His own church. Christ is the church’s centrality. He is her passion. He is, as it were, her obsession. Members specialize in nothing—except Christ. Their goal is to make Him visible in their community. Their hallmark is their growing knowledge of the Lord. Their testimony is their openness to all of God’s people, their humility, and their unmistakable love for one another. House churches that are not characterized by these spiritual features not only miss a step, but they also dance the wrong dance.

## The Short Shelf Life of a House Church

It's quite telling to note that many house churches disintegrate over a brief time span. The average life span is six months to two years.

Within this six-to-two window, the church usually dissolves due to an irreconcilable split or an unresolved crisis. (The crisis is usually rooted in a high-drama power struggle, a sustained bickering over hobbyhorse theology, or an unwillingness to forbear with intractable personalities.)

If the group manages to hold together through the thrall of such conflict, it usually drifts toward a scaled-down, "small is beautiful" version of the institutional church. That is, someone from within the group will devolve into the near equivalent of a modern clergyman.

The other common result is that a group of men who tag themselves "elders" will surface and rule the church in oligarchical fashion—running roughshod over everyone else's sensibilities. In churches of this type, the elders embrace the idea that supervising a church involves breathing down the necks of God's people—controlling the way they dress, vote, eat, and a dozen other things.

Granted, there are house churches that push past the two-year mark—all without clergy or authoritarian elders. Thankfully, such churches are becoming more common in our time. I believe this is partly because we have entered into a new season of the restoration of the church. (More on that later.)

In short, when Jesus Christ is not the center of a noninstitutional church, the only fuel that can drive it is a fascinating issue, a charismatic personality, or a nifty doctrine. But all of these fuels yield low mileage. And when they run dry, the group collapses.

A fellowship of believers can be held together in any beneficial way only when a continual encounter with the Lord Jesus becomes the dominating element. At bottom, if Christ is not the glue of a nontraditional church, its meetings will become shallow, colorless, and eventually unsustainable.

The psalmist once said, “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps. 11:3 KJV). Why have so many house churches gone belly up? Most often it’s because they were not founded upon a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, they were founded upon something less. Either that, or they ended up straying from the centrality of Christ and substituting something else in His place.

### Misguided Rallying Points

There are a host of things today that Christians assemble around—even noble things that have something to do with Christ. Doctrines, practices, and viewpoints have taken center stage in many contemporary house churches in the West. Examples would be homeschooling, home birthing, a particular political viewpoint or end-time theology, etc. The list is endless.

These kinds of things hold such groups together. But there is a colossal difference between meeting around some *thing* about the Lord and meeting around the Lord Himself. There is a vast ocean between meeting around an *it* and meeting around *Him*.

If you were to read your New Testament with an eye for discovering how the early churches were formed, you would find that they were solidly built upon an unshakable revelation of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:16–18). All the churches that Paul planted were built

upon this revelation (1 Cor. 3:11). And out of this mighty unveiling of Christ, churches spontaneously issued forth.

It's important to note that the apostolic declaration of Jesus Christ has community-forming properties. According to Scripture, the church is built by the preaching of the Word of God. But that preaching must stop once the foundation has been laid. And then it should resume periodically.

Too much preaching from an apostle (or any person for that matter) will kill church life. Too little will also end up hurting it. The itinerant ministry of church planters is very powerful. If carried out properly, it doesn't overlord because it's not present very often. Yet it's important for a church's proper foundation and its continued progress in the Lord. In this regard, planting a church is like holding a dove in one's hand. If the church planter holds it too tightly, he will kill it. But if he holds it too loosely, it will fly away and be lost.

When a church is founded upon the Lord Jesus Christ, it can survive intense pressure and testing (1 Cor. 3:6–15). The winds may blow brutally and the floods fall fiercely, but the house will stand because it was founded upon a Rock (Matt. 7:24–27; Luke 6:46–48). Put another way, Jesus Christ and His cross are the only unmovable foundations upon which God's people may rightfully gather. By "His cross," I don't only mean His redemptive work, but also the experience of dying to oneself. The church exists because of Calvary. But it lives and survives when God's people bear the cross and die to themselves (Matt. 16:24–25; Mark 8:34–35; Luke 14:27; 1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 4:11–12).

Therefore, those Christians who are seeking to experience church life without the sturdy props of human hierarchy must build their

community upon the Lord Jesus Christ and His cross. If they do not, their chances of surviving are pretty low. While having healthy apostolic input is no guarantee for the longevity of a church, it's an important help.

### **The First Wave of House Church**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States saw its first move of God outside the religious system. Countless converts were made during this time period. Many of them began to meet in the primitive simplicity of homes without a clergy. Most of these budding “churches” were populated with young people.

A number of clerical leaders felt it was their responsibility to bring stability to the growing movement. Many of these men left their clerical positions on Sunday and instantly rose to become leaders of the new movement on Monday.

In a very short time span, these men introduced to these simple and innocent groups a form of discipleship that eventually squeezed out all semblance of life. While their motives were noble, they did untold damage to a genuine move of God. The young converts who once knew no human headship were used to spawn international movements (some of which eventually became full-fledged denominations). Those movements were built on legalism and authoritarianism. These movements swallowed up scores of living, breathing organic churches and Christian communities. Christian lives were shipwrecked on the rock of a perverted doctrine of authority. The work of God was choked by the hands of men.

How could this happen? Very simply: These leaders knew nothing of God's way of raising up workers. They had never spent a

day in organic church life as nonleaders. Though they were gifted, they were neither prepared nor sent.

### **The Second Wave of House Church**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the United States witnessed its second stirring outside the traditional church. It was at this time that the phrase “house church movement” was born. Unlike the earlier move of God, most of the people in the second wave were not youth, but middle-aged adults. Few of them were new converts. Most were Christians who were disaffected with the institutional church. In fact, many of them became Christians during the first wave. So they left their sacred buildings, they dumped their pastors, and they began gathering in homes.

As a reaction to the flaws of the first movement, the second wave of house church folk looked upon any form of itinerant church planting with a suspicious eye. The movement was taken captive by a spirit of absolute egalitarianism that ruled out any need for extralocal help. *Leadership* became a dirty word, and “leaders” were viewed in the worst possible light.

The peril of the first “house church movement” was the fact that God’s people didn’t exercise discernment in welcoming itinerant ministry. They embraced a group of spiritual leaders who were untested and untrained (biblically speaking). None of them spent any time being prepared within the context of an existing organic church. Instead, these people retained their clerical statuses. They simply switched their sphere of ministry from the basilica to the home. Interestingly, the letter of 2 John speaks to this very problem. In it, John warns a local assembly not to receive untested workers (vv. 10–11).

Regrettably, the second “house church movement” was plagued by the opposite problem. It failed to receive those whom God had genuinely sent. Interestingly enough, the message of 3 John addresses this very issue. John makes mention of Diotrephes, who would not receive the traveling workers whom John sent to minister to the churches (vv. 1–11).

### **A New Wave**

Today, a third wave of organic church is upon us. A “revolution” as George Barna and others are calling it.<sup>2</sup>

Every year, one million adults leave the institutional church in the United States. According to missional church expert Reggie McNeal, “A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith.”

We are living in a day of new beginnings. It’s a new season for the restoration of God’s house. God is breaking new ground with respect to the shape, the mission, and the practice of the church. Many Christians are longing for the organic expression of the church—for this is what their spiritual instincts cry out for. Organic church life is our native habitat—it’s our natural environment. The groundswell in the body of Christ for such is increasing.

It’s crucial, therefore, that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past—on either end. May the Lord give us open hearts as well as spiritual discernment so that the Lord Jesus may be given first place in these new expressions of church.

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2 For details see “The Current Move of God: Eight Characteristics” at <https://frankviola.org/currentmove.pdf>.

# CHAPTER 6

## RESTORATION OR REVOLUTION?

*It has often been that the greatest thing of God has been very small in the eyes of man.*

—T. Austin-Sparks

In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a small surplus of books written on the restoration of the apostolic ministry. Many of these books claimed that the 1990s would be “the decade of the apostle.” They asserted with absolute certainty that God would raise up “thousands of apostles,” restoring the apostolic ministry to the body of Christ on a grand scale.

The '90s have passed us by, and none of these high claims have come to pass. Nevertheless, some of these authors continue to carry on quite loudly about the “restoration” of the apostle and the other “fivefold ministry” gifts at some nebulous date in the future.



Interestingly, this same “prediction” has been with us since 1948.<sup>1</sup> The literature, claims, exact rhetoric, and “prophecies” that were put to pen in that year are identical to what is being said today.

Some have called the movement that emphasizes the restoration of ministry gifts “the Restoration Movement.” It’s my opinion that this movement has been tried and found wanting. What is needed in the body of Christ is not restoration. It’s not even revival.<sup>2</sup> What is needed is a *revolution*—a complete and radical change from top to bottom, a new sighting of Jesus Christ and His church, and a change of both mind-set and practice.

To put it bluntly, we need a revolution in our understanding of the Christian life. We need a revolution in our practice of the church. And we need a revolution in our approach to church planting. Consider the following table that isolates the key differences between *restoration* and *revolution*:

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1 While the Restoration Movement has antecedents elsewhere during the nineteenth century, it picked up steam during the “Latter Rain Movement” in Canada in the late 1940s. See my article “Rethinking the Fivefold Ministry” for details: <https://frankviola.org/fivefold.htm>

2 Historically, revivals resurrect a dying church back to ground zero. Once the church is resurrected and the revival ends, the church continues on with the same unscriptural practices it had before it sank into death. Revival, therefore, is merely a temporary solution to a long-term problem.

RESTORATION	REVOLUTION
1919: "Apostles" are seen as wielding official authority over pastors and congregations. They typically engender fan-club followings, are treated like celebrities, and happily sport the title "apostle."	"Apostles" are largely hidden and broken vessels who sport no titles. They hold no office. Like Paul of Tarsus, they usually work for a living. <sup>3</sup> Most have a distaste for the word <i>apostle</i> and never use it to describe themselves. <sup>4</sup>
Emphasizes the victorious living of the individual Christian.	Emphasizes the corporate life and Christ-centered experience of the believing community.
Emphasizes "spiritual gifts," "power," "signs and wonders."	Emphasizes the eternal purpose of God, the deeper work of the cross, and the centrality of Jesus Christ.
Measures success by large conferences that draw thousands and the number of churches that are part of their "movement."	Measures success by quality; ignores the size of the crowd. (Throughout Paul's entire ministry, he planted only around fourteen churches. Paul was more concerned with <i>quality</i> than <i>quantity</i> .)
Stresses the spectacular things of what God is "going to do" in the <i>future</i> .	Stresses the unsearchable riches that are available in Christ <i>now</i> and shows God's people how to appropriate them <i>today</i> .
Focuses on spiritual warfare and triumphing over the Devil. (The Devil gets almost as much airplay as does the Lord.)	Focuses on the glories of Jesus Christ. The Devil is viewed as defeated and is largely ignored.
Churches are controlled by pastors, high-powered apostles, or all-powerful elders who do virtually all the spoken ministry.	Churches are led by <i>all</i> the brothers and sisters in Christ. Members have been equipped to function and care for the church by extralocal workers who leave them on their own.
Much talk about "equipping the saints" where they will be ready to minister in some elusive date in the future.	"Equipping the saints" is not a buzzword, but a reality. God's people minister <i>now</i> in the meetings of the church and to the lost.
Sees the church as a fighting army. But in reality it's an institution that requires a church building, a pastor, and a Sunday-morning order of worship.	Sees the church as a free-flowing, beautiful woman—a new species, "the third race" that's inseparable from Jesus Christ Himself. The sacred church building, the modern pastoral office, and the Sunday-morning liturgy have all been abandoned.
Embraces an old, tiresome mind-set that's rooted in Western individualism and seventeen hundred years of ecclesiastical tradition.	Embraces an entirely new mind-set that's rooted in the New Testament narrative and the fellowship of the Godhead.

<sup>3</sup> An apostle has a right to receive full financial support from the churches he works with (not a salary, but financial help). Paul, however, did not exercise this right (2 Thess. 3:8–9; 1 Cor. 9:3–12; 2 Cor. 11:8–9; 12:14).

<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is because the term *apostle* has become corrupted, abused, and filled with an ego-inflated, unbiblical meaning.

# CHAPTER 24

## THE JOURNEY AHEAD

*Is there another stream running even more deeply and more hiddenly these days among the members of the Body, a scattered people who are being taken into the depths of the revelation and experience of Christ in the most extreme measures of the Holy Spirit's dealings, emptying, crucifying ... a pioneer company which the Lord will need for the opening of the way for the remainder of the Body to follow—perhaps some “eleventh-hour laborers” now in the process of His producing?*

—George Moreshead

The divine principle of extralocal, itinerant work is the forgotten chapter in the first-century story. It's the overlooked pattern of the New Testament narrative. It's the neglected ministry of the body of Christ.

If we will see a richer and higher expression of the body of Christ, it's our responsibility to return to first principles. If we do not, God's timeless purpose will continue to suffer loss. Doubtlessly, we will continue to see many small bands of Christians seeking to meet organically, but many—if not most—will be shallow and unsustainable.

I believe that the need of the hour is for Christians who are called by God to raise up the church as a living, breathing experience. Christians who are broken and tested. Christians who refuse to take shortcuts but who have *first* lived in an organic expression of body life as brothers and sisters before they ever dare plant a church. Christians who have a deep and living relationship with Jesus Christ. Christians whose lives have been devastated by the cross and the breaking of God. Christians who have incomparable insight into the mystery of God. Christians whose only passion is the Lord and His house. Christians who have a revelation of Christ that burns in their bosom. Christians who are mesmerized by the face of God, and who have the ability to preach Christ in such profound depths that God's people are left staggering.

The need of the hour is for such people to wait on God until they are properly prepared and then sent. And once sent, to plant the church in the same way that all first-century workers did: by equipping it and then abandoning it to the Holy Spirit.

Equally needed is for the body of Christ to recognize the role of such people.

Today is a day of repairing and mending. And repairing the corporate testimony of God's people is no small thing. While there is no shortage of Christians in the West, there is a great dearth in

the way of corporate testimony. God's grand mission is to secure a people in every locale that are foundationally constituted and built together as a visible, locatable, geographical, corporate expression of His Son.

Christians who have left the institutional church, no matter how long they have been saved, will have an awfully hard time going on with other Christians in a face-to-face community without a clergy. Thus, workers who know the headship of Christ—who have experienced genuine body life with all of its glory and gore and who have been broken by God's sovereign dealings—are an indispensable resource for helping God's people discover how to gather under Christ's direct headship today.

### **Exploring Your Options**

Organic church life is relatively easy to discover. It occurs all over this planet. Whenever Christians gather in an informal way without static ritual and experience the living Christ together, body life begins. But it does not last long. So having organic church life is easy if the right ingredients are in place. But it's extremely difficult to keep alive and pure.

For this reason, both Scripture and experience testify that the aid of an itinerant worker is a net plus in the whole operation of organic church life. Critics may misconstrue this candid observation as job security for modern apostles. (The workers I know do not charge for their spiritual service. Unlike most ministers today, they come free.) It's just the raw fact. And to my mind, it represents an urgent need that exists in the kingdom of God today. On the heels of that, what follows are my suggestions to the following groups of people.

## TO THOSE CALLED TO CHURCH PLANTING

You have two main options as far as I'm concerned. That is, if you wish to be on scriptural grounds:

1. Give up your ambition and your pride. Surrender your lust for position, humble yourself, and relocate to where there's a genuine organic expression of the church. And live in that church as a nonleader for a period of years.

Learn Jesus Christ all over again in the context of body life. Even better, if you can find such a rare thing on this earth, move to a city where an experienced, honest, nonlegalistic, nonelitist, and nonsectarian church planter is actively raising up a church. Watch him explode with spiritual passion as he builds the house of the living God, and learn all you can from him.

If you are truly called by the Lord to raise up His house, this is your lineage. Every church planter in the New Testament walked this path.

2. If it is impossible for you to move, your other option is to invite a church planter to your town to raise up a church. You, of course, would simply be a brother or a sister in that church with no special status. As we saw in part 1, this is God's way of raising up Christian workers.

## TO YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WHO FEEL CALLED OF GOD

In my personal judgment, those who are called of the Lord should not begin their ministries before the age of thirty. This principle is consistent throughout Scripture. Priests were trained for their ministry in their twenties, and they began their service at age thirty (Num.

4:3ff.). Jesus Christ, the model for all church planters, did not begin His ministry until He was thirty years of age (Luke 3:23).

There are pragmatic reasons for this. People in their twenties have simply not lived long enough to acquire the wisdom necessary to handle the enormous and monumental problems that will arise in church life. They have not yet learned the depths of the cross or of Jesus Christ Himself.

In addition, youthful enthusiasm is a powerful counterfeit for genuine loyalty to the Lord and the power of God. It's also commonly exploited by religious organizations. In their excitement, young people don't just jump on the horse; they jump over it. And when they hit thirty, or close to it, they often burn out.

I've met many Christians in their late twenties and early thirties who had expended their youth on some Christian organization. Sadly, their enthusiasm for God drained away. Their adrenals had been beaten to death. Their Christian life had been wrung dry.

The engine of youthful enthusiasm will run only so long. Then it crashes and burns. While it looks like the power of God at first glance, it's a human substitute. In this connection, countless young men and women who were ready to die for Christ in their early twenties have fallen away from Him when they neared the age of thirty.

In her timeless classic *Passages*, Gail Sheehy demonstrates that during the ages of eighteen to twenty-two, people are seeking a hero—a mentor to follow. They are also avidly searching for a cause greater than themselves to throw their lives into. It's for this reason that many Christians were converted between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. They don't realize that they are doing this at the time, but during those ages, they are exploring their options for life.

When a person reaches the ages of twenty-eight through thirty-two, however, they begin to question and reappraise every major commitment they made in their twenties. Those commitments are either abandoned or deepened. It is for this reason that many who hit age thirty end up tearing up the lives that they built during their twenties. That includes shedding themselves of their mentor (in some cases, they turn against them). Sheehy calls this the “Catch-30” crisis. Illusions are shaken. It’s the time to break or deepen commitments—to dig in or bail out.

I have lost count of the number of people I knew in their twenties who loved the Lord passionately and would seemingly do anything to serve Him. Yet when they hit thirty, those same people turned their backs on God and elected to no longer be invested in the Christian faith. The embers of youthful zeal died out; the engine that had run their spiritual lives skid to a screeching halt. And there was nothing left for them to run on.

For this reason, people who are called of God to His work ought to spend their twenties experiencing Christ and the life of the church. They ought to discover the work of the cross and the basic lessons of living by divine life. They should wait on their ministry and not hurry it.

So I ask: Can you, young man or woman, wait on your ministry? Can you throw away the clock, forget the calendar, and give up your lust for serving God? And instead, get to know Him first—deeply—in the context of Christian community?

Only then will you be of use in helping to fulfill God’s eternal purpose. Without an experience of the cross and knowing Jesus Christ in authentic, organic community, you will not have the proper preparation to raise up the house of the living God.



## TO PASTORS WHO WISH TO MAKE THE TRANSITION

As I have said elsewhere, transitioning from an institutional church to an organic church is not cosmetic surgery. It's a complete overhaul. I cannot give specific advice on how to do this in a book because each institutional church has a varying set of elements. (For instance, some own buildings, some do not. Some have hired clergy, some have not. Some are megachurches, while some are very small, etc.) But I can give you a few general suggestions that will furnish you with a beginning:

1. Shut down your Sunday-morning and Wednesday-evening "services." Instead, have a Wednesday-evening "ministry meeting." Begin these meetings as you would ordinarily begin your church services, with worship and praise through music and song.

You will not be giving your typical sermons in these meetings. The purpose of these meetings is to change the paradigm that's present in your congregation. Your short-term goal is to give them a vision of God's eternal purpose and their place in it.

Many pastors are gifted teachers. So I would encourage you to begin teaching through one of the books under "The Mission of God" section listed on the site [www.HouseChurchResource.org](http://www.HouseChurchResource.org).<sup>1</sup> The other thing you will want to do in these "ministry meetings" has to do with the next point.

2. On Sunday mornings, the congregation will meet in homes. They will divide up into these homes ranging from twelve to twenty people. The divisions will be determined by geography. In these home

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<sup>1</sup> *Ultimate Intention*, *From Eternity to Here*, and *The Stewardship of the Mystery* have been the most popular for this exercise. *From Eternity* has a free discussion guide at [www.FromEternityToHere.org](http://www.FromEternityToHere.org).

meetings (not services), each group will go through the assignments in part 3 of this book.

Important: There will be no designated leaders or facilitators in these home meetings. It's your job to equip the congregation on how to go through these assignments. And to get weekly reports on how things are going. You can make time for these "reports" during your Wednesday-evening "ministry meetings."

So you will have two meetings a week. One will be the "ministry meeting," where you will teach through a book; the other will be home meetings, where the congregation will go through the assignments in part 3 of this book.

3. Once each group has completed each of the assignments in part 3, invite an experienced church planter to hold a weekend conference for your congregation. The church planter will then make suggestions regarding the next step. Let me stress that the above three points are only the beginning of the transition.

## **A Challenge We Must Face**

I sincerely hope that every person engaged in church planting would face the enormity of their task. So many have taken shortcuts in their preparation. So many have adopted nonbiblical methods for starting churches. So many have never experienced organic church life or allowed themselves to be deeply known by others in Christian community. So many have simply not bled enough. This is the great tragedy of the present-day Christian worker.

Perhaps this book will awaken some out of their daydream of wrongly assuming that the church of Jesus Christ is something cheap and easy to build.

It's my sincere conviction that most of what we produce in the way of church life simply does not stack up to anything worthy of the name of the bride of Christ or the house of God. Many in our day have a rather anemic view of the church. They see it as a voluntary association of the saved. Either that or they view it as the equivalent of human relationships, a Bible study, or an evangelistic mission.

But the church is so much more than that. Therefore, I wish to raise your standard of what the church is according to the heart and mind of God. As I've demonstrated in *From Eternity to Here*, the church is both divine and human, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and natural. It's the corporate expression of Jesus Christ worked out in a close-knit community of human beings.

To bottom-line this, I believe we have started in the wrong place. And it is high time that we take pains to correct our course and return to the principle of the organic. The church of Jesus Christ is a living, breathing organism. As such, she has a right to be born in a manger, not welded together in a laboratory or sewn up in a factory. If we will see church life that fulfills the vision of God, we must return to the biblical pattern for church planting and nurturing.

For this reason, the earth awaits those whom God has called to be humble enough to learn from those who are ahead of them. It awaits those of apostolic stature who have the house of the living God on their hearts. It awaits those who are willing to align themselves with the Lord's pattern for spiritual preparation and refuse to cut corners. It awaits a day when such people will burn for God's eternal purpose and pay any price to fulfill it.

May God send that day upon this earth.

## The Making of an Apostle

The kingdom of God is in desperate need of a new kind of Christian worker. A worker who is honest, nonlegalistic, nonelitist, nonsectarian, nonreligious, and who refuses to play religious games. A worker who will not fold like an accordion under the pressure of insults, ridicule, criticism, false rumor, character smears, spin, and slander, but one who can survive fire. A worker who is not in the ministry for money, game, or fame, but who serves the Lord day and night, spilling his insides, giving and dying for the kingdom of God.

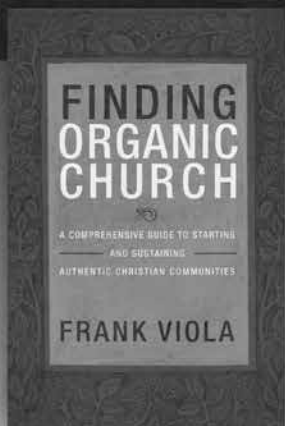
There is a revolution brewing in the body of Christ today, and the need of the hour is for God to raise up, from the soil of organic church life, workers who will lead the charge. Perhaps some who are reading that last sentence wish to know “What will it take for me to be on the front lines of that revolution?”

The answer is simple. It takes vision, insight, courage, and spiritual depth. It takes humility, maturity, genius, pain, sacrifice, and lots of rejection. It takes tenfold more problems and more heartaches than you could ever imagine that God would pour out on you. It takes the ability to see the unseen, to know the depths of the Lord Jesus and the breaking and devastation of His cross, and the ability to drown God’s people with a breathtaking revelation of Christ.

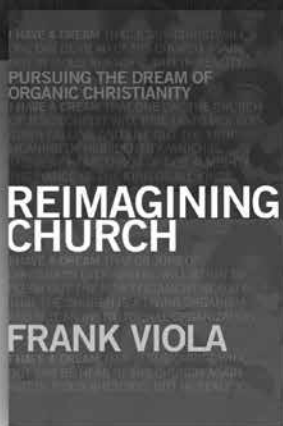
That’s all it takes. I hope and pray that some who are reading these words will be captured by the depth of God’s ways and give themselves wholly to them. Perhaps, then, the Lord’s ageless purpose will find visible expression all over this planet.

Will you be one who will accept the challenge and respond to the call?

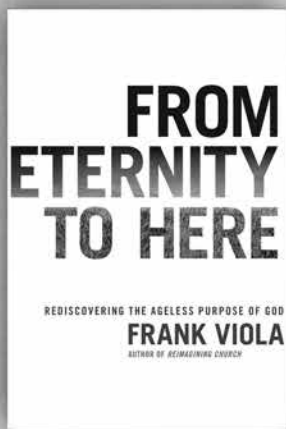
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