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Understanding the Work of Church Planting

THE SPIRITUAL NATURE OF CHURCH PLANTING

The work of church planting is from first to last a spiritual undertaking. It is the implementation of all that the Bible teaches concerning the nature and purpose of the church. It is the application of the power and work of the Holy Spirit, who draws men to the Savior, unites them together in the church, and gifts and equips them for the work and witness of the body of Christ. And it is a frontal assault on the forces of Satan. Those who set their minds and hearts to establish a new church of the Lord Jesus Christ invite and must expect the opposition of the Evil One. But they also have the great privilege of being used as tools in God's hand as He gathers His people and builds a habitation for Himself among them. No methodology conceived by man adequately reflects the depth of the spiritual nature of church planting. Those who involve themselves in this work regularly stand in awe of the power of God and the truth expressed by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church."

The importance of a Biblical ecclesiology

It is vital for the church planter and those who work with him to have a well-thought-out concept of the nature and purpose of the church. The doctrine of the church must be a well-studied subject for those who have responsibility to steer and guide the development of a new church. The Reformed faith presents a deep and robust understanding of the nature, purpose, work, and structure of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. These Biblical concepts impact every aspect of the work and ministry of church planting. So it is important from the beginning of the process to stress what the Bible teaches about the kind of local church Christ intends to build.

Some implications of a Scriptural theology of the church

It is not the intent of this manual to set forth even a summary of the Reformed doctrine of the church. But it is important that all who involve themselves in the work of starting a new church have a clear, working knowledge of the doctrine they are implementing. Here are some aspects of this doctrine which impact the work of establishing a new church so significantly that they illustrate the need for church planters, overseeing sessions, and presbytery home missions committees to keep it always fresh in their minds.

Because *the church is the body of Christ* (1 Corinthians 12:12–31), those who are involved in starting a new one must be ready to embrace those whom God sends as needed and useful members. And they must be ready to demonstrate the love and concern of Christ to the community of which they are a part, even when they are small and weak.

Because *the church is the bride of Christ* (Ephesians 5:22–33), those who are involved in starting a new one will face competing realities. On the one hand, they are working toward an ever-increasing measure of sanctification in their lives as members and in their corporate life as a faithful bride waiting patiently for the return of the bridegroom. On the other hand, God is adding to their number people from other theological traditions and those who are being saved. For these the need of basic instruction is great, and for some their level of maturity is small.

Because *the church is the building of God* (1 Peter 2:4–10) which He is in the process of completing, those who are involved in starting a new one will face discouragement more than others as they observe the disarray of the “construction site” and as they experience long delays waiting for the arrival of more living stones.

Because *the church is a foretaste of heaven* (Hebrews 12:18–24), those who are involved in starting a new one will constantly face heavenly scrutiny to see that they are carefully following the plan laid down in God’s Word, so that the church’s worship, preaching, fellowship, and ministry will welcome His people to heaven.

Because *the church has a God-given order and government* (Ephesians 4:11–16), those who are involved in starting a new one must be careful to follow it rather than the structures and strategies developed by men. And they must be willing to see the “keys” of discipline used for the new church’s blessing and benefit, even in its earliest months.

Because *the church has a God-given mission* (Matthew 28:18–20), those who

are involved in starting a new one do not have the luxury of waiting until they are larger, stronger, or better equipped before beginning their missionary work of evangelism and discipleship.

A spiritual assault on the gates of hell

But the work of church planting must also be seen from the enemy's perspective. Of all the projects undertaken by men, the one that Satan must surely fear and oppose the most is the involvement of believers with their Savior in the work of establishing a new church. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18: "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." The church is attacking. Satan is defending. But the gates of Hades are not strong enough to withstand the onslaught. Satan and his forces are defeated by the Church of Christ. Therefore, those who are involved in the work of starting a new church should not be surprised when community opposition is fierce, when meeting locations are hard to find, or when financial instability threatens the future of the work. Satan and his forces will do all they can to prevent one more taste of Zion and one more safe haven for the saints of God from appearing on the scene. So a new mission work of the OPC should expect to face the fiery trials of opposition and difficulty as a part of the spiritual nature of the church planting process.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCH GROWTH

At the beginning of the discussion of the process of planting a Presbyterian and Reformed church, it is necessary to address the subject of church growth. To some, the term describes what happens naturally when God's people gather for witness and work (Acts 5:14; 6:7; 9:31). To others, it identifies a destructive emphasis on numbers and on methods of attracting people to church meetings. The modern Church Growth movement has certainly had an impact on churches and denominations around the world. So today, as we work with core groups and send out church planters to do the work of establishing new Presbyterian and Reformed congregations in North America, we are aware that what they think about church growth is an important aspect of how our new congregations develop. What follows here is an analysis of church growth from a Reformed perspective.

About the history of the Church growth movement

The Church growth movement may inadvertently be traced to a book published by a Presbyterian minister in 1886. Dr. John Nevius was a Presbyterian station missionary to China who began to call into question the methods employed by previous generations of foreign missionaries. Using Biblical principles to critique missionary methods regularly employed when he arrived in China in the late 1870s, he wrote a series of articles on the subject, which were collected into a book entitled *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*. Nevius was critical of the inappropriate payment of foreign nationals to become professional missionary representatives and of the whole process of creating foreign missionary stations, which provided living quarters for the foreign missionaries, but kept them isolated from the people they had been sent to reach. The indigenous church principles which he advocated quickly became known as the Nevius method and were adopted *in toto* by the Presbyterian Mission to Korea in 1894. The phenomenal growth of the Presbyterian Church in Korea is a notable chapter in the history of missions.

Orthodox Presbyterian missionary to Korea, Bruce Hunt, in his 1958 preface to the fourth edition of Nevius's book, paid high tribute to these indigenous principles and the Biblical exegesis which undergirded them. He recounted how successive generations of Presbyterian missionaries were required to learn the principles and had to pass an exam on the contents of the book before moving to the field. And he went on to comment on the significant impact these principles played in the development of missionary work in Korea, as well as in other countries where they had been employed, such as Ceylon, Madras, Japan, Uganda, and West Africa.

In 1970 the father of the modern Church growth movement, Donald McGavran, published his major work, *Understanding Church Growth*. It was a summary of twenty years of observation and research about how individual denominations and the national Churches of emerging Third World countries grow. Frequent citations of the pioneering work of John Nevius and of the employment of his indigenous church principles in the Presbyterian Church in Korea and elsewhere are evidence of the focus of McGavran's study and passion. He was interested in discovering how God was causing the growth of national Churches and individual denominations—hence, “understanding” Church growth.

However, the careful reader of the original edition of McGavran's work will also notice a distinct stylistic method used by the author to clarify the focus of his study. When the words “Church growth” appear together in

this original volume, “Church” always appears with the uppercase *C*, while the word “growth” always appears in the lowercase. The original intent of the Church growth movement was to make missiological observations about how God was expanding the size and strength of national Churches on the foreign mission field.

But from these missiological beginnings, the Church Growth movement took on a life of its own. By 1974 McGavran had teamed with Win Arn to write *How to Grow a Church*. Here two subtle assumptions were made. First, it was assumed that if individual, local churches in the United States could copy the methods employed by the Churches that God was blessing in other parts of the world, then they could enjoy similar growth. Second, it was assumed that sociological observation is just as valid as theological construct. The “homogeneous unit principle,” which observes that people prefer to make a profession of faith and to attend a church among others from their own social and ethnic background, and therefore urges that churches structure themselves into homogeneous social and ethnic fellowships, is an example of this. And in 1977, with the publishing of *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, by McGavran and Arn, the Church Growth movement introduced a new element into their discipline—the practice and process of church planting now became a part of the study and focus of Church Growth.

However, when the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension talks about the importance of the growth of our mission works in size and maturity, it is not thinking about the employment of sociologically derived methodologies to gather people, but about the appropriate, Biblical functioning of the church. And when we discuss methods of planting new churches, we are not thinking about organizational science, but about the practical outworking of a Biblical ecclesiology.

Consider the Biblical issues of church growth and church planting:

This is the age of the harvest

Jesus said, “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field” (Matthew 9:37–38). He was signaling the dawn of a new age in redemptive history, the age of the harvest. As the book of Acts records this harvest growth, it always reminds us that God is in charge of it. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). “And all who were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). We can

therefore be optimistic as we plant new churches. We are the harvesters, and this is the age of the harvest. No rebellious, sin-hardened individual is beyond hope, because the Sovereign Lord can, and often does, soften the hardest of hearts.

God uses our efforts

“Preach the Word,” Paul said to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2). “Be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.” He went on to tell Timothy, “Keep your head in all situations, endure hardships, do the work of an evangelist, discharge the duties of your ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5). The importance of the Word of God in the work of evangelism and Biblical church growth cannot be overemphasized. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The salvation harvest occurs only as people are confronted with the lordship and saving work of Jesus Christ. But that requires hard work on the part of God’s people. God uses our diligent efforts to bring in the harvest.

God causes the growth

“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6). Paul concluded, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (verse 7). God from all eternity has purposed to save a multitude of people through the sacrifice of His Son and to assemble them into local expressions of His body called the church. The importance of the divine initiative in Biblical church growth was confirmed when Jesus said to the confessing Peter, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). He did not say, “Men shall build my church,” nor to Peter, “You shall build my church.” What He did tell us is that the church is supernaturally generated by the triune God. Biblical church growth is from beginning to end the work of God as He brings in the harvest.

THE DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ORGANIZED CONGREGATION

In a chapter that presents an introductory overview of the work of church planting, it is appropriate to lay out the hoped-for end result of the process. What will a Biblically founded and ordered Presbyterian and Re-

formed mission work look like when it is ready to be organized as a new and separate congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church? It is assumed that the Protestant “marks” of a true church, as delineated by Calvin and other Reformers, are already present, namely, the true proclamation of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. What follows are some of the time-honored characteristics which collectively describe the nature of a mature church of the Lord Jesus Christ, toward which all church planting efforts are pointing.

Self-sustaining

A mature church of the Lord Jesus Christ is one which is able to sustain its ministry with sufficient people and finances without assistance from outside sources. Its members are committed to Biblical giving patterns, and it has enough of them to meet its financial obligations, to pay its pastor, to sustain its discipling and outreach ministries as a congregation, and to provide care for the poor and needy.

Self-governing

A mature church of the Lord Jesus Christ is one that has found and chosen from within its number a group of qualified, God-appointed elders. The congregation has come together around the leadership of a session and a pastor whom they respect and to whom they willingly submit. Their leaders, also possibly including some deacons, are men who have shown themselves to be godly examples to the congregation and to be committed in belief and practice to the doctrinal standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Self-propagating

A mature church of the Lord Jesus Christ is one that is shouldering its responsibilities both in the area of covenant faithfulness and in the area of Great Commission implementation. On the one hand, the congregation is seeing its own covenant children professing faith in Christ and taking up their responsibilities as communicant members. On the other hand, the congregation is consistently reaching into its community with gospel witness and is seeing previously unconverted men, women, and children professing faith in Christ and becoming responsible members of the church. In addition, the congregation is also taking up its responsibilities to go beyond the borders of its own community with a worldwide outreach,

and is both assisting financially and seeing some of its members physically going into the world harvest field.

Self-consciously a church

A mature church of the Lord Jesus Christ is one that understands its ecclesiastical role and has defined its ecclesiastical commitments. It understands itself to be a church and not a collection of individuals and the causes they embrace. It is informed about the multitude of theological opinions within the Reformed system of doctrine and has consciously chosen to be confessional without adopting a set of its own special emphases. It has learned as a congregation how to defer to one another in love in its decisions and in its conduct. And it has freely and happily chosen to be part of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and to own and embrace her heritage and values.

ESTABLISHING THE RIGHT PRECEDENTS

It is said that when George Washington became the first president of the United States, he went out of his way to ensure that every act of his public office was carefully considered beforehand, since he realized that everything he did was establishing a precedent. Those involved in planting a new church should be aware that the way things are done and said in the earliest days of the church planting process often become the expectations and the stated norms for years to come. Careful thought about establishing the right precedents in the following categories could make a significant difference in the progress of the development of a new mission work:

In theology

There is nothing more practical in the life of a new church than sound theology. A young congregation's theological undergirding in its earliest days protects it from error and keeps it on a steady course. But because the Reformed faith is so all-encompassing in its scope, specific aspects of it can be overemphasized, and certain extrapolations of its teaching can inadvertently become normative practices. Care must be taken early on that the full-orbed system of doctrine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and not side implications of it, becomes the theological foundation of the new church.

In polity

If the new church is to be Presbyterian in its government, then it ought to function that way from the beginning. For instance, it is unwise to create a steering committee at the inception of a work for the purpose of “involving people” and “encouraging men to lead,” and, soon after, for the presbytery to appoint a group of borrowed elders as an overseeing session to provide shepherding for the people and oversight and direction for the work. That is a formula for conflict. With careful instruction, submission to a borrowed session can be instilled from the beginning of the work, and it can progress from the start as a Presbyterian church. Nor is it wise at the beginning of a mission work to make decisions by congregational majority and later to make the shift to sessional decision making.

In administration

At the beginning of a new mission work, familiarity and friendly informality are often the rule. Communicating information, counting and depositing tithes and offerings, arrangements and decorum in the room where worship is conducted, and a host of other matters are cared for in an informal manner without much thought to precedent. But it will not take long for offense to arise over such matters as the inappropriate counting and handling of money, or apparent disrespect in the preparation or disposal of communion elements. And it is important that the members of the mission work volunteer to help and are actively involved in the multitude of tasks that need to be accomplished for the effective operation of the church’s ministry. Chapters 4 and 5 of this manual discuss in some detail matters of propriety, decorum, and administration.

In tradition

Precedent and tradition often go hand in hand. In the work of establishing a new church, so much of what is done is new to those involved that a sense of the lack of permanence becomes apparent. It is sometimes helpful to utilize the regular practice of carefully thought-out activities or procedures as a way of engendering a sense of permanence in the new work. Holding a monthly fellowship meal, presenting a Scripture challenge to each new member at his reception into the congregation, participating in an annual presbytery-sponsored family camp, and holding an annual church banquet to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the church are examples of the positive establishment of traditions to encourage a sense of permanence in the mission work.