



Church Planting

SPONTANEOUS REPRODUCTION

by Ross Ulrich

“Another parable He spoke to them: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.’” Matt.13:33. I believe this parable teaches us, among other things, that the kingdom of heaven, planted by Christ in this world among men, will continue to grow and reproduce until every nation (Greek ethnos = tribe) has heard the Good News. Yeast quietly but continually buds, grows, divides, and repeats the process many times, with each new yeast cell budding, growing, and dividing until the whole batch of dough is leavened. In the same way, it is Christ’s will that each local “cell” of His church buds, grows, divides, and repeats the process many times, with each new church “cell” budding, growing, and dividing until the whole world of humanity has been confronted with the gospel and claims of Christ!

Example not Instructions:

In the New Testament God does not give us a “Thus saith the Lord...” concerning exactly how churches should be planted. Christ does give some general commands, i.e. make disciples of all nations, baptize them, teach them all that I have commanded, etc. But God does not give us specific instructions or spell out minute details about how churches should be planted or even how they should be organized after they are planted. I believe God purposely let some details unspecified so that His church could multiply well within every people group, each with its unique ways. The fact that Christ did not spell out every detail should also cast us upon Him for continual direction by His Holy Spirit. It was never Christ’s intention that church planting or administration be a cut-and-dried process of following a certain formula. Rather, He is the living Head, giving relevant and current direction through His indwelling Spirit working through every member of His body. The

Spirit uses the Word and never directs contrary to the Word. May God save us from trying to reproduce or guide churches using only the Word without the power of His Holy Spirit. Conversely, may God also spare us from trying to do His work by the guidance of the “Spirit” in disregard to His Word.

Although Christ has not spelled out the details of how we should plant churches, we do have some beautiful examples of church planting in the New Testament. We should not lightly toss these aside. During Pentecost the church was birthed at Jerusalem when the oil of Christ’s anointing flowed down on His body, the believers. Christ had made it very clear to His disciples that they were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. However, as one reads through the book of Acts, one gets the idea that the church at Jerusalem was grappling seriously with the non-Jewish nature of the church Christ was building. For thousands of years God’s people had observed Moses’ law. Was

it possible now to be one of God's people and not keep those laws? Even the elders at Jerusalem seemed slow to understand God's plan. Stephen saw it clearly and paid dearly for it. Strangely, the one God chose to use to plant churches, distinctly Gentile churches, yet holy churches, was one who was present and consenting to Stephen's death. By God's transforming grace, Saul, the zealous church persecutor, became Paul, the Apostle and zealous church planter.

Examples from Paul's Ministry

It is amazing that one who so fervently fought for Judaism became the apostle who most clearly understood the non-Jewish nature of the church and labored incessantly to build and defend it. What were Paul's methods? We can learn much by studying his ministry. Several things stand out as we study the Books of Acts and Paul's epistles. Probably the first thing that jolts us is the fact that in church planting, Paul didn't spend a long time in one place. When God directed him to a city, he preached the gospel. Those who repented and believed were promptly baptized then gathered regularly for teaching. Second, Paul very soon ordained local leaders to lead the new church. Third, he did not become the pastor in any local church; instead he kept the role of itinerant teacher/preacher/church planter (which is really what an apostle is). Fourth, Paul did not collect monetary support from the group of people in the locality in which he was ministering; neither did he maintain the function of the local church with his own funds or from his sending church.

Time to Go Home

Paul preached a simple gospel of salvation by faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection. The Holy Ghost aided his gospel preaching by mightily convicting the hearers as well as attesting to the authenticity of the message with astounding miracles. Paul had a very strong faith in the power of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. He also seemed to understand thoroughly that the church is under the authority and control of Christ Jesus,

not any man. Could it be that the weakness so often seen in mission work today, in which missionaries hold control of a local work too long, results from doubt or lack of understanding in these areas?

Driven by Desire for the Unreached

Why didn't Paul settle down in one place for a long time? Reading through the Book of Acts, it seems the longest he stayed in any one place was about two years and three months at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19). His next longest stay seems to have been for eighteen months at Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11). The length of time he stayed in most cities is not given, but being unmentioned, seems to be of shorter duration, perhaps a few months. Paul himself gives us one of his strongest reasons for not staying long in any one place. He was driven by the burning desire to preach Christ to those who had never heard. In his own words to the Roman church, "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: But as it is written, 'To whom He was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand.'" (Romans 15:20, 21).

Time to Move On

To our way of thinking, it seems reckless of Paul to move on so soon to a new place especially in light of subsequent troubles that arose. If Paul was a church planter in our time, he would surely receive criticism. Very likely folks would use the multitude of problems that plagued the Corinthian church (I Corinthians), and the churches which turned away from Paul in Asia (II Tim.1:15), to argue that he was leaving them prematurely. Yet Paul was obviously led and blessed by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Paul understood something we do not. Why was he willing to risk churches losing out, rather than staying a long time in one place? And, since Paul was being daily directed by the Holy Spirit, why was God willing to run the risk of churches losing out, rather than have His servant linger in one place? There must have been some



Like chickens, we can learn from example.

advantage or God would not have directed that way. As we ponder this, two reasons quickly become apparent. First, newborn creatures learn best by observation. We once had a hen sitting on eggs that somehow broke her leg. It healed partially, but not fully. Because of this she could not scratch for food, she could only peck. When her eggs hatched, and all her fluffy little chicks followed her, guess what? None of them scratched, they only pecked! With his mouth, Paul taught the new converts the importance of preaching the gospel to all nations. But likely they did not understand the great importance of this until Paul announced to the fledgling church that he was leaving to move on. “What? Paul, you can’t leave us yet! We’re barely standing on our own two feet!” Yet move on he did under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus the importance of preaching Christ to every creature was driven home to the young Christians as nothing else could have wunderlined and highlighted it. Paul’s short stays also forced the churches and their young leaders to lean hard on God, instead of Paul. This is a very valuable and desirable effect.

Local Ownership

Paul very soon ordained local leaders to lead

each new church. He consistently resisted the urge to become the pastor in any local church. Instead he kept the role of itinerant church planter. Thus from its birth, each new church bore the responsibility of making its own decisions. Yes, in the early stages, Paul was there to guide with counsel from God’s Word, but he was just that—a counselor, not a pastor. Incalculable advantage is lost when a missionary becomes the pastor of the local church. The church will have a foreign flavor because the leader of the church is a foreigner. The zeal and ingenuity of the local people will likely be stymied because the church is not really “theirs”. The indigenous believers may begin to think that they can’t really lead out since all authority lies in the hands of a foreigner. Thus their God-given creativity and ability is crushed in the bud and may never come to blossom, or if so, only after a long delay. By so doing, converts come to depend on the missionary, fearful to step out on their own in church administration or evangelism. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to tell Timothy that to qualify as an elder/bishop a man must not be a novice (I Tim.3:6). Was Paul then going against his and God’s own counsel to appoint elders who had

SPONTANEOUS

“developing or occurring without apparent external influence, force, cause, or treatment”

Merriam Webster Online

been believers probably only several months (Acts 14:21-23)? Perhaps some of these elders had been Jews or Jewish proselytes who thus were well acquainted with the Old Testament, but the Bible doesn’t tell us so. Perhaps the fires of persecution tested new believers to quickly mature them. Perhaps our definition of a novice is different from

Paul's (or God's) definition. Whatever the cause for the difference between Paul's methods and current missionary efforts, there is good instruction for us in Acts 14:23, "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had **prayed with fasting**, they **commended them to the Lord**, on whom they believed."

Your Money or Theirs?

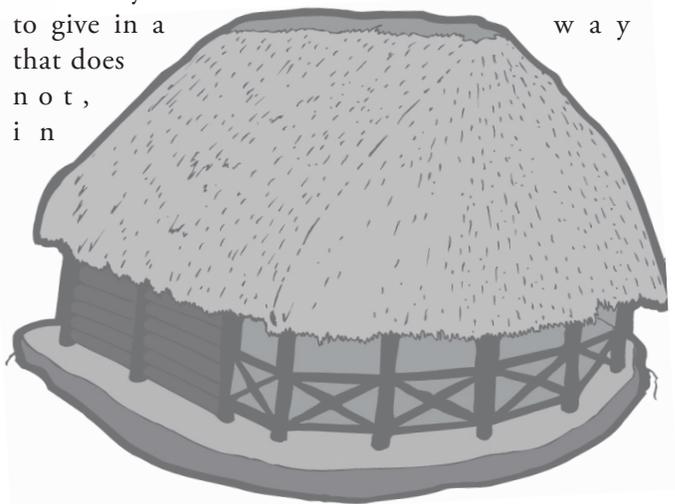
Notice also that Paul did not collect money for his personal support from the group of people in the locality in which he was ministering, though he did receive love gifts from churches which he had previously established. Paul is painfully clear on this point and spends much time defending his position. In II Cor. 11:9-13 he says, "But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them (false apostles, deceitful workers) which desire occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we." In Paul's day, just as in ours, there were those who used evangelism as a business, a money-making venture. Paul did not want to be

"What will the folks back home think when they see pictures of a church that looks like a big hut?"

identified with them in any way, or give them the excuse of, "But Paul does it that way." Paul did not collect money from the local church in which he was ministering, nor did he fund the functions of the local church with his own money or from his sending church. Neither do we have any indication that Paul took initial oversight of the finances of the local church. These are *very* important rules if we want to plant churches that reproduce spontaneously. If churches from the outset are provided for by the missionary or mission agency, they will feel that the church is not theirs. When the locals' sweat and hard-earned profits have contributed to buy the simple church benches or the pressure

lamp for evening services, it is theirs in a way it will never be if the missionary used his money to provide these. Oftentimes the problem is brought on by the missionary who wants to build a church building quickly. (Doesn't that give good signals to the folks back home that the work is progressing well?) Or sometimes the missionary feels that the church building should be of better quality than the locals can afford. The missionary was likely used to living in a house of high quality building materials and may not feel comfortable building a church building of mud walls and thatch roof. He wants to build a low-maintenance building that will last a long time. (What will the folks back home think when they see pictures of a church that looks like a big hut?) However, by taking the building plan and finances into his own hands, he gives the locals the clear signal that they can't do it well enough and that this is the way church buildings ought to be built. Consequently, when there is need for the next church building, the plans and finances must come from the missionary. The same thing happens when a missionary uses methods of evangelism that locals cannot afford. If he uses a sound system and lights run by a generator to hold an evangelistic crusade, the locals will see this as the proper way to evangelize. When he moves on with his equipment, they may not be able to afford similar equipment. Or if he donates the equipment, they may not be able to maintain it or replace it when it wears out. At that point the evangelism will likely grind to a halt. Does all this mean that the missionary or church planter should not give to needs around him? No! But it does mean that the missionary must be careful

to give in a way that does not, in



the end, do more damage than good (by destroying local ingenuity, effort, and relationships). When Paul was in Ephesus he obviously gave to needs around him. As he testified in Acts 20:34, 35, “Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Yes, as a Christian brother in a community, Paul gave but didn’t become the whole deacon fund!

Alone, but not Abandoned

Finally, none can rightly claim that Paul did not care about the churches he planted as an ostrich lays her eggs and leaves them in the sand. Even after the Holy Spirit moved him on to new loca-

tions, he labored over the churches and individual members of those earlier churches in fervent prayer with tears! At times he wrote letters of encouragement, admonition, or correction to those churches. Sometimes he sent messengers to them, at times for a short visit and at other times to “set in order the things that were left undone” (Titus 1:5).

Conclusion

May we all learn from Paul who never watered down the gospel and yet became all things to all men. May God fill us and lead us by His Holy Spirit that we may be fruitful for eternity, a living and contributing part of that leaven that will diligently and consistently work until the whole is leavened.