

## 10 Possible Church Planting Principles from Acts<sup>1</sup>

No other book gives us as much material on the activity of church planting as the Book of Acts. In it, the author Luke, charts the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth in Rome. As that gospel goes forward, people are converted and churches are established.

At one level it's simply wonderful to read what the risen Lord Jesus did as he continued to grow his church from his heavenly throne. But it's not in our New Testaments simply for historical record. The question is, what do we do with it? How do we handle it? How does it instruct us today?

To that end, it's worth distinguishing three perspectives on narrative

Some things are clearly prescriptive for the church. They are required. They are non-negotiable. In Matthew 28, Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations. And he promised his presence with them as they did so to the end of the age. He has not rescinded our marching orders. That's prescriptive. And here are other things in Acts that fall into the same category. We have to do them because Jesus requires them of us. We are to love one another, we are to preach the gospel, we are to baptise new believers and so on. But not everything in Acts can or should be replicated.

Some events are merely descriptive. They happened. But we should be under no illusion that they are repeatable. Pentecost was a one off. It was the fulfilment of divine promise. Paul's custom of going first to the Jewish synagogue was a cultural or contextual decision.

For our purposes, what we're after is those things that are representative. By use of literary techniques such as repetition and emphasis, the author can help us see that they are intended to be normative even if they're not presented to us with authoritative force. They are often repeated and so it becomes clear that this is the way to do things, they stand in harmony with the rest of the New Testament practice and teaching, they are not specific to a particular culture or context. And so, we're looking for church planting patterns. We want to pay attention to the way Paul in particular did things.

And so, what follows is a potential list of abiding church planting principles from the book of Acts.

### 1. Choose God's Candidates

Acts 13:1-3

Acts 16:1-3

The foremost church planter in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul, was specifically selected by God. Look at Acts 13:2

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing heavily from Ott & Wilson, *Global Church Planting*.

<sup>2</sup> While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'

But it wasn't only Paul who was called. Barnabas was as well. And so were the other like Peter, James and John. They were called in different ways. But God chose them. Paul was called by a heavenly vision (Acts 26:19) and it was reaffirmed through the Antioch Church in (Acts 13:1-3). But Timothy's appointment came through Paul's invitation and the recommendation of his church in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3, 2 Timothy 1:6).

The principle is that God chooses those through whom he will work in church planting. Our responsibility is to discern God's call upon an individual. Practically I think this is a coming together of recognition from the church and conviction from the individual. Neither is enough on its own. If a guy is convinced that he is a planter and should plant a church, but the church doesn't recognise that, that's a potential red flag. It's certainly amber for the time being. If the church recognises a guy as a leader but he isn't convinced then we can't coerce him into doing it. 1 Peter 5 makes it clear that no one should be an elder if they're not willing to be an elder.

#### Implication

This has implications for our selection of church planters. In one sense we want to discern God's prior call on their life. It's not simply about asking whether they have the ability, suitability and capacity to do it. We need to ask the Lord whether this is what He would have him do.

## 2. Use Divine Resources

Acts 1:4,8

From a human perspective, the church planting in Acts is a story of Paul and his missionary teams. But we must not miss the divine perspective. Behind the scenes, the risen Lord Jesus Christ was doing what he promised to do and was growing his church through the work of his Spirit.

We see that in three main ways

Dependence on the Spirit's empowerment (Acts 1:4&8). They would only be able to plant churches in the strength supplied by the Spirit.

Dependence on the Spirit's direction. The apostles depended on the Spirit's direction for their decisions about where to go next. The means of that guidance varies from case to case

Acts 8:26, 39

Acts 10:9-16

Acts 12:5-11

Acts 16:6-7, 9-10

Acts 18:9-11

Acts 27:23-26

Dependence on the Spirit's filling. To be filled with the Spirit is compared to being filled with wine in Ephesians 5. And so, it has to do with being controlled or influenced. It's clearly a good thing. And it leads to good outcomes.

'Church planting remains fundamentally a spiritual enterprise that requires spiritual means found only in the Holy Spirit. All the human effort, strategy, resources, and creative genius that go into church planting are vain unless endowed with his life-giving power. This is not only a pervasive pattern in Acts but a theological principle: No church planter will be successful apart from the agency, leading and filling of the Holy Spirit' p47

#### Implication

Church planting is primarily a spiritual activity. On whom and what are we depending on when we try to plant churches? How is that going to be expressed?

It is an absolute priority that we are a praying network. One of my main priorities must be to launch a new prayer gathering of lay people.

### 3. Plant by Evangelism

Acts 6:7

Acts 12:24

Acts 13:49

Acts 19:20

Church planting ought to lead to evangelism, if we do it right. But prior to that, evangelism leads to church planting. The first churches were planted through the evangelistic activities of the apostles. The very first church plant, in Jerusalem, came about because of Peter's evangelistic sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

The gospel was preached in multiple venues: large groups in public settings and at other times through more private dialogue.

The response was mixed: large numbers were converted (Acts 2:41), mockery and ridicule (Acts 2:13, 17:32), persecution (7:54-60), or further enquiry (17:32)

The manner of preaching was adapted to the hearers but the message always centred on Christ and required a response of repentance and faith

Luke is careful to record that the growth of the church in Acts is expressed in terms of the growth, spread, multiplication and prevailing of the word of God.

'Spirit-empowered proclamation plays a pivotal role in the Book of Acts, and it is the very source from which church planting flows. Thus workers must remember that church planting begins with evangelism and that here is no substitute for bold, Spirit-filled sharing of the gospel. This is the methodological foundation on which the churches described in Acts were built, and it is the model we are to follow today' p47

#### Implication

We need to remember that the activity of church planting is not completed when we move a small congregation of believers to a new area. That's the start. It's getting the pieces in place.

What happens next constitutes church planting. Will that church take the gospel to the neighbourhood? We need church planters who want to liberate a congregation to speak the gospel in their networks and the neighbourhood.

#### **4. Integrate New Believers**

Acts 2:42-47

Those who express faith in Jesus Christ were not left alone. They were congregated into fledgling congregations. They are incorporated into Christ's body. Integrated into a discipling community. This is what we see in the snapshot of early church life in Acts 2:42-47.

##### **Implication**

We must ensure that our church planters are not merely evangelists who love sharing the gospel with people but also church builders. Church is the context within which the Great Commission is to be implemented as we baptise and teach people from all nations.

One of the great discoveries in recent years has been the recognition by the brilliant mission agency London City Mission that they need to gather people into church families and that allowing church planting in their buildings is a way of doing that.

#### **5. Appoint Local Leaders**

Acts 14:21-23 cf Titus 1:9

Paul and his companions evangelised a region and then at a subsequent point established local leaders. Sometimes they did that on their first visit. At other times they did that on their return as seen in Acts 14. According to Titus 1:5, the missionary task was incomplete until local suitably qualified elders had been appointed.

‘The long term success of cross-cultural church planting is largely determined by the establishment of local lay leaders, the turning over of church governance to them, and the continuation of a relationship through visits and correspondence’. P48

##### **Implication**

Church planters must be committed to leadership development. It is absolutely critical to the long-term health of a church plant that (especially though not exclusively) suitable men be identified to take on responsibility to shepherd the flock. That is especially the case in cross cultural situations where church planters are looking to reach into new cultures with the gospel. It's hard and a real challenge but it's absolutely necessary.

#### **6. Plant with Teams**

Acts 16:6

Acts 17:1

Acts 21:17&18

Paul was not a one-man band. He began as an associate of Barnabas. He later formed and led various teams. He constantly brought people together for the cause of the gospel. The use of teams is a clear pattern in Acts.

Some of that will have been due to the dangers of travelling alone. But other factors seem to have influenced his decision. Four reasons seem to have contributed to his use of teams

1. He employed ministry associates to help teach, act as envoys and build fellowship between the churches. You stand in a noble tradition! Some travelled with him (Acts 16:6), some were left behind (Acts 17:15) and others went on ahead (Acts 20:5)
2. He recruited regional representatives to demonstrate the essential unity of the church and combat the nationalism of certain Judean Churches (Acts 15:1-35, 21:17-26)
3. He benefited from personal supporters who ministered to his needs. Aquila and Priscilla shared their home with him and gave him employment (Acts 18:1-3). Luke attended to his needs (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11). Tertius served as a scribe for him (Rom 16:22). John Mark who had earlier abandoned Paul later assisted him and went on mission with Timothy for Paul (Col 4:10, Phil 24, 2 Tim 4:11).
4. He trained future leaders. Paul copied the pattern that Barnabas has used with him, which was essentially 'come with me'.

#### Implication

The very best church planters are team players. They love teams. They want to work in teams. They're happy to lead teams. But they know they're not the star player in that team. And that it takes a team to score a goal.

### 7. Recruit Future Workers

Acts 16:1

Acts 20:4

Acts 27:2

Paul deliberately recruited co-workers from the churches that he'd planted. He plundered the best to grow the missionary work. For example,

- Timothy came from Lystra Acts 16:1
- Gaius came from Derbe Acts 20:4
- Aristarchus and Secundus came from Thessalonica Acts 20:4, 27:2
- Sopater came from Berea Acts 20:4
- Priscilla and Aquila, Stephanas, Erastus, Achaicus and Fortunatus came from Corinth Acts 18:2, Rom 16:23, 1 Cor 16:15-17
- Apollos, Trophimus and Tychicus came from Ephesus Acts 18:24, 20:4, 21:29
- Epaphras and Archippus came from Colossae Col 4:1, 17
- Epaphroditus came from Philippi Phil 2:25, 4:18
- Phoebe came from Cenchrea Rom 16:1

What a list!

Take just one of those mentioned, Timothy.

About 3 years after the estimated time of Timothy's conversion in Lystra on the 1<sup>st</sup> MJ, Paul took him on as a ministry apprentice (Acts 16:1-3)

Soon after that, Timothy began working semi-independently of Paul in

- Thessalonica (Acts 17:14, 1 Thess 3:1-5)
- Macedonia (Acts 19:22)
- Corinth (1 Cor 4:17)
- Philippi (Phil 2:19) and
- Ephesus (1 Tim 3:14-15).

'Recruiting workers from the harvest for the harvest was clearly a key to the reproduction of churches and the expansion of mission. In this way training and multiplication were integrated into the church planting approach' p51

Implication

Church planters need to recruit from within for the next church planting team, and perhaps especially the next church planting leader. We need to detect, develop, delegate and deploy those whom the Lord has gifted for gospel ministry. That's why you guys are so critical to our future church planting.

## 8. Employ Flexible Priorities

Acts 19:21

Paul and his team took strategic considerations into account in their methodology for church planting. But there was no rigid strategic plan that was determinative. Five features are characteristic of the approach that he took.

1. He had an overall direction of travel in mind (Acts 19:21, Romans 1:14&15, 15:19-24).
2. He didn't rely excessively on long term strategic plans, he seems to have moved to geographically adjacent areas that were open for missionary work
3. He seems to have held onto strategic priorities, he focussed his efforts on cities with commercial, religious or regional importance and he bypassed the villages
4. He established strategic regional bases during his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> MJs, places like Pisidia Antioch, Corinth and Ephesus were centres of Roman penetration with Jewish communities
5. He began by reaching out to prepared people groups. He went first to the Jewish populations that respected the Old Testament writings and then to God-fearers who were associated with the synagogues. Presumably he hoped that these would provide a bridge to the Gentile populations. Often people would come to faith from the Jewish and God-fearing population who would then serve as a base for Gentile evangelism/

He had a relaxed plan. He did missionary church planting like a Calvinist.

Implication

There is a very great temptation to design a proactive plan that maps out who, what, where, when and how it will happen. But we can't plan everything down to the nth degree because we simply do not know how it will go. I think Paul was more laid back than that.

We need to be gently proactive and obediently reactive. We know where our mission field is. Let's hold on to our strategic priorities of reaching every borough in London with the gospel.

## 9. Sense Divine Redirection

Acts 16:6&7

When it became clear that God had other things in mind, he went with that. They were not so arrogant as to think that their plans took precedence over divine superintendence!

They believed that God used the following things to direct them:

- Favourable and unfavourable travel conditions (1 Cor 16:4-9)
- Specific revelations (Acts 16:9, Gal 2:2)
- Adverse circumstances (Acts 16:6)
- Inner compulsions (Acts 16:7)
- Open doors (1 Cor 16:5-9, 2 Cor 2:12-13)

Implication

This is perhaps the art rather than the science of church planting. Perhaps it's the miracle. We need to be able to spot when the Lord is opening and closing a door. And so, we might need to close a church plant that hasn't taken root and grown. And we might need to respond to an opportunity that we weren't expecting. Discerning flexibility and a willingness to embrace risk is necessary.

## 10. Foster Mutual Commitment

Acts 11:28

1 Cor 16:1&2

2 Cor 8

New churches were not simply independent but interdependent. They were interrelated to other churches. They stood in mutual relationship with one another not as separate disconnected entities.

This was demonstrated in several ways

1. The spiritual authority of the Jerusalem church and its leaders was recognised by other churches. We see this in the Jerusalem Council's decision regarding the place of the Old Testament Law in the church (Acts 15)
2. Churches contributed to the material needs of sister churches. We see this in the famine relief sent to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:28, 1 Cor 16:1, 2 Cor 8)
3. Paul recruited workers from nearly every church he planted to serve in various capacities on mission teams and in other churches

4. The repeated sending of greetings between churches at the close of Paul's letters demonstrates that a web of personal relationships had grown among them
5. Apostolic letters were circulated amongst the churches

### **Implication**

We need to be aware of a growing self-sufficiency that isolates us from fellow church plants. We need church planters who instinctively want to work with other churches and not simply be defined by being different to them.

### **Conclusion**

There you have it. Ten potential abiding principles with continued implication for our church planting endeavours. We can't be mere pragmatists. There's a gentle ought from the representative activity in Acts.