The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting

A Guide for Starting Any Kind of Church

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Introduction

Why write a book on church planting? In 1992 I wrote *Planting Growing Churches*. One of the reasons I wrote it was that there were very few books in print on this important topic and most addressed it from an international missions perspective—not as something that necessarily needs to take place in North America.

The Best Solution

Today, however, I felt compelled to write this book for two reasons. First, church planting is the best solution to the current state of the church in America—a church in crisis. Early in the twenty-first century, 80 to 85 percent of the churches sprinkled across America are either plateaued or in decline. If the typical traditional church in America went to the local emergency room, the doctors would quickly put it on life support. David Olson, director of the American Church Research Project, writes, “17.5 percent of the population attended an orthodox Christian church on any given weekend in 2007.”1 This means that an astounding 82.5 percent didn’t attend an orthodox Christian church. And as the population continues to grow, the church loses more ground.

Another important detail that some could miss is that the number of Americans who profess no religious affiliation has practically doubled since 1990 and, most important, their central location has shifted from the Northwest to the Northeast. Why is this important? Writing in *Newsweek*, Jon Meacham quotes Albert Mohler as to the significance of all this for the church and its faith:

> It was a small detail, a point of comparison buried in the fifth paragraph on the 17th page of a 24-page summary of the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey. But as R. Albert Mohler Jr.—president of the Southern Baptist Theo-
logical Seminary, one of the largest on earth—read over the document after its release in March, he was struck by a single sentence. For a believer like Mohler—a starched, unflinchingly conservative Christian, steeped in the theology of his particular province of faith, devoted to producing ministers who will preach the inerrancy of the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only means to eternal life—the central news of the survey was troubling enough: the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent. Then came the point that he could not get out of his mind: while the unaffiliated have historically been concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, the report said, “this pattern has now changed, and the Northeast emerged in 2008 as the new stronghold of the religiously unidentified.” As Mohler saw it, the historic foundation of America’s culture was cracking.

“That really hit me hard,” he told me last week. “The Northwest was never as religious, never as congregationalized, as the Northeast, which was the foundation, the home base, of American religion. To lose New England struck me as momentous.” Turning the report over in his mind, Mohler posted a despairing online column on the eve of Holy Week lamenting the decline—and, by implication, the imminent fall—of an America shaped and suffused by Christianity. “A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us,” Mohler wrote. “The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.” When Mohler and I spoke in the days after he wrote this, he had grown even gloomier. “Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society,” he said from his office on campus in Louisville, Kentucky.

The current crisis represents what has become an ongoing problem for a church in decline. The important question is what can be done about this? Is there a solution to the problem of the decline of Christianity in general and the American church in particular? The answer is a resounding yes. The solution is twofold. First, the 80 to 85 percent of the churches that are plateaued or in decline need to pursue and undergo congregational revitalization or renewal. Most have wandered far from what Jesus called them to do in such notable passages as Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8. If the church is to recover and have an impact on what is becoming a post-Christian culture, it will need to return to what Jesus has called it to do—“Make disciples” (Matt. 28:19)!

Second, it’s imperative that our churches plant more churches. In the mid-twentieth century, churches and denominations were doing reasonably well and saw little need for church planting, so they “dropped the ministry ball” in starting new works. For example, every other year at Dallas Seminary, I would host a church-planting week when I would invite several speakers to come and cast the vision for church planting as a viable ministry option for our students. I would also invite various denominations as well as others to
come on campus during the week and recruit our students. Few denominations and organizations showed any interest.

Today all this has changed. The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked by a steady decline of the church, and the denominations in particular have begun to realize that their very survival is dependent on church planting.

Of the two solutions—congregational renewal and church planting—church planting is by far the better solution. There are at least four reasons for this. One is best summarized in the words of missiologist Peter Wagner. In response to the question, What is the difference between church planting and church revitalization? Wagner said that it’s the difference between having babies and trying to raise the dead. As one who has trained leaders to plant and revitalize churches all across North America and beyond, I would attest that the latter has proved much more difficult than the former. Struggling, established churches are steeped in complacency and the status quo and thus tend strongly to resist needed change, whereas church plants see this evident problem of established churches and are most open to embracing the kind of healthy change that will make a difference for Christ in their communities.

Another reason is that newly planted churches evangelize better than older, established churches. Bruce McNicol, cofounder and president of Truefaced, writes that among evangelical churches, those under three years old will win ten people to Christ per year for every one hundred members. Those ranging from three to fifteen years old will win five people per year for every one hundred church members. But once a church reaches fifteen years, the figure drops to three people per year for every one hundred members.³

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<th>Church’s Age</th>
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A third reason church planting is more effective is that church planters gain credibility with their members as leaders faster than those who assume the pastorate of established churches. Few established churches are willing to hand over the reins of leadership completely to a new pastor. Before these pastors can become leaders in the church, they must build credibility and win the trust of the congregation. This can take anywhere from four to eight years, and some churches will never let the pastor lead. In a sense new pastors are like new members; they’re joining the congregation and it will take time for them to prove themselves. However, the church-planting pastor has the advantage of assuming the leadership role from the very beginning. He is there first, and new congregants are joining him. Thus from the start most will grant him the credibility and trust necessary for him to lead them.
A final reason church planting is an effective solution is what I refer to as the problem of acquired baggage. In this context, “baggage” refers to the mistakes or snafus that pastors make during their tenure in the church. Pastors are people and, like all people, they make mistakes. However, today’s culture has seen too many pastors fail for numerous reasons and we are hard on pastors. The problem for leaders who assume the pastorate of established churches is that often much if not all of the “baggage” is shifted from the shoulders of the former pastor to those of the new pastor. Thus they inherit the fallout from the mistakes of the former pastor.

Church planting, however, doesn’t work this way because there’s no former pastor and thus no acquired baggage. Certainly the planting pastor will make mistakes and acquire his own baggage, but he doesn’t have to carry the added weight of another’s missteps in the process.

Key to the Future of the Church

A second reason I wrote this book is because starting new churches is vital to the future of the church in America. The point is simple. No church plants—no church. Like all organizations, churches have an organizational life cycle. They’re born or planted and experience early growth due to a natural emphasis on outreach. However, problems begin to arise along the way, and far too many churches shift from an outreach to an in-reach mentality as they attempt to solve their problems. This, in turn, slows growth. Should churches ignore or fail to correct the situation, their growth stymies and they plateau. If they continue in failing to correct the situation, they experience early decline that if ignored will turn into later decline and ultimately death.

The bad news is that in time all churches will fail and die. This is hard to comprehend as I consider the church that I attend—Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas. Lake Pointe is a megachurch, celebrating its thirtieth year, with around seven thousand people in attendance. However, someday we’ll not be here, and the evidence for this is the many viable churches in the first century that died long ago. Take for example the Jerusalem Church found in the early chapters of Acts. This was clearly a megachurch due to its approximate size of ten thousand attendees (Acts 2:41; 4:4). It was also abiblically based, spiritually minded church (Acts 2:42–47). But where is this church today? Should you fly to Jerusalem and attempt to visit this church on a Sunday morning, you would discover that it no longer exists, as is true of the first-century churches of Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, and others. Organizations aren’t perpetual. Because they are made up of people, in time they will die. It’s imperative that we keep in mind the fact that the church has always been and is still only one generation away from extinction.
The good news, however, is that we can start new churches. And because churches in the first century and throughout history planted vibrant churches, Christ’s church is still alive today. Through church planting the church has survived. In Matthew 16:18 the Savior promised that he would build his church, and one of the chief ways he’s accomplished this is through starting churches that are in touch with the culture and are reaching new generations for Christ.

Why Another Book on Church Planting?

The first question was, Why write a book on church planting? The second is, Why write another book on church planting? There are a number of good books out on church planting, which wasn’t the case when I wrote my first book in 1992. And for this I’m delighted. So why another book? The reason is that most current books endorse a particular model or way of doing church. These models are reflected by various labels, such as emergent churches, Next Generation churches, megachurches, seeker-driven churches, seeker-sensitive churches, purpose-driven churches, cell churches, connecting churches, multi-ethnic churches, contemporary churches, house churches, organic churches, new-paradigm churches, postmodern churches, and missional churches. I suspect that with the emphasis on the environment (a move that I favor), eventually we’ll be hearing about green churches. In this book I will use the new term Great Commissional churches for churches that combine the Great Commission mandate with the church missional concept.

It is obvious that some of these models target a particular group of people, such as the Emergent or Next Generation (people born after 1982), seekers, postmodern people, and others. Other models focus on size, such as house
churches, cell churches, and megachurches. Still others address an approach to ministry, such as purpose-driven and organic churches.

This book, however, isn’t an endorsement of a particular model of church, though there are many good ones out there. I’m not trying to encourage a particular way of doing church as most books on church planting and some church conferences do. The problem is that what works in one part or region of the country may not work in another. There’s no guarantee that what is effective on the West Coast will be effective on the East Coast, or what is meaningful in the South will be meaningful in New England. What is relevant to one generation or group of people may not be relevant to another.

This book is what the title says. It addresses the nuts and bolts of church planting. It’s a guide for church planting in general, regardless of the model. Most important, I’m arguing for following a process for building Christ’s church (Matt. 28:19–20) not a particular model. The important term here is process. By following the fourfold process outlined in this book, the result will be a church model—a fresh, new church that’s relevant to who you are, where you are, at this time in your life.

This Book Is for You

If you plan to start a new church or be on the staff of a new church, or if you’re the pastor of an established church that wants to sponsor a church plant, this book is for you.

In it I will examine what the Scriptures say about various issues associated with church planting, such as, What is a church? What is the church’s mission? Who were the first-century pastors? My assumption is that you want to know what the Bible teaches about these topics. If that’s the case, this book is for you. I mention this because I see an alarming trend on the part of some publishers to move away from those of us who stress what Scripture teaches. It’s not that they oppose Scripture, they’re simply more interested in what a particular leader thinks or says than Scripture. For me the first question is, What does the Bible teach about the principle I’m addressing? For these publishers, however, this isn’t the first question, nor is it the second or third. Thus I really appreciate Baker Books for its willingness to stay the course and publish the works of people like me who are vitally interested in the teaching of Scripture on doing church.

Where Is This Book Going?

I’ve divided Nuts and Bolts into two parts—the preparation for church planting and the process of church planting. The process that I briefly mentioned above is at the very core of this book. However, the process likely won’t hap-
pen if the church planter doesn’t prepare for it. Those of us who are football fans look forward every year to the month of August. Why? Because August is when our teams begin preparation for the new season that begins in late August or early September. This preparation involves a heavy physical and mental regimen. First, the players have to condition their bodies for the season. This involves lots of running and some weight lifting. Second, they have to prepare their minds, which involves learning the plays and listening to motivational messages.

There are certain steps that church planters must take if they are to prepare themselves for a season of church planting. These steps align with each of the book’s chapters. To make sure we know what we’re talking about, the first chapter defines the church, church planting, and the church planter. The second helps church leaders discover where they fit in the church-starting process. It helps them determine if they should lead or minister from a support position. Chapter 3 provides some practical approaches to raising the funds necessary for starting churches. Chapter 4 addresses a number of assumptions that undergird this book and the planting process, such as the importance of Scripture and hermeneutics, the necessity of change and innovation, and, finally, the stages of church planting from conception through birth.

Part 2 addresses the important fourfold process that all church planters must work through to build a church that is relevant to who they and the people they will attract are and where they are and that honors the Savior. I’ve addressed each of the concepts that make up the process—values, mission, and vision—in separate chapters. Next, I break the last concept—the church’s strategy—down into seven steps that are located in the last seven chapters.

The Fourfold Process

| Core Values | Mission | Vision | Strategy |

I have included an appendix that provides a rich source of information for church planting. In it you will find a number of tools to aid you as you seek to determine if God would have you plant churches. Other tools are sample mission and vision statements, a core values audit, and much more.

Finally, I will use the masculine pronoun almost exclusively when referring to a pastor or church planter in spite of a number of women who are pastors and church planters. The reason is simply to avoid using “his or her” throughout this book.
PART 1

Preparation for Church Planting
What Is Church Planting?

The Definition

Over a number of years of teaching at a seminary and consulting with numerous churches, I’ve discovered that I must define my terms. I’ve heard or been involved in a number of discussions where everyone assumed they knew what others were talking about only to find out later that wasn’t the case. For example, when some popular, well-known person is speaking at a conference on leaders and leadership, the speaker and we assume we all know what is meant by these two terms. Right? Wrong! Very few define leaders and leadership in the same way. Simply take time to thumb through several books on leadership at the local bookstore, and you’ll see what I mean.

The purpose of this chapter is to define terms or concepts in such a way that you will be clear about what I mean. I want us to be on the same page from the start. My focus is on the definition of church planting. However, for even further clarification, I’ll also address the definitions of the church and church planters.

Church Planting

First, I want to define church planting, which is what this book is all about. A mistake in understanding at this early stage could affect how you comprehend the rest of the book. I define church planting as an exhausting but exciting venture of faith, the planned process of starting and growing local churches...
based on Jesus’s promise to build his church and in obedience to his Great Commission.

In this section I will break down this definition into its various components for further clarification.

**Exhausting**

I suspect that few who have been involved in any kind of church ministry would be surprised to hear me say that church planting is exhausting, as are church revitalization, interim ministry, and other forms of church ministry. And the same could be said about parachurch ministry. The reason I need to say this is that some embrace the mistaken idea that starting churches is easy. After all, how difficult is it just to teach the Bible and love on new people? However, church starting involves so much more than this, as you’ll discover in the pages that follow, and at times it will drain you of strength.

Church planting involves long hours, perhaps longer than those put in by pastors of established churches. There’s so much to do when starting from scratch and never enough time to do it all. There will always be one more visit that needs to be made or a phone call to be returned. Church planters need forty-eight-hour days, not twenty-four-hour days.

Most disappointing is that people of the faith, especially pastors, will criticize church planters rather than encourage them. Other churches may not be excited to see a new church planted anywhere nearby. They view the new church as competition and may say cruel things to dissuade the planter. Then there are those who’ll attack a church planter because he’s planning a church that’s contemporary and different from the norm. This is emotionally draining and can take a toll that’s far worse than physical exhaustion.

**Exciting**

One emotion that counteracts the exhaustion of starting a church is the excitement it engenders. I make a point of telling the church planters I train that, if there’s no excitement, then something is wrong. I’ve never encountered a viable church-planting situation where the people weren’t excited about what they were doing. Therefore, if you plan to start a church but notice that people aren’t excited about it, then call it off—go no further. Something is seriously wrong. Stop what you’re doing and reevaluate the entire project. It’s likely that now isn’t the time to plant such a church. The people simply aren’t ready. Note that this is the case in far too many established churches. Somewhere along the way, they’ve lost the excitement of being involved in Christ’s church, which doesn’t bode well for the future.

Church planting is exciting for a number of reasons. First, church planters are pioneers. That’s another way of saying most of them are entrepreneurs. They’re wired from the beginning to start new works, and this helps them...
realize who God has made them to be. There’s an excitement about being who God wants you to be and doing what you know God wants you to do. There is also the excitement of anticipating what God could accomplish through you and the new ministry. God might use you to reach thousands, as he has Billy Graham, or he may use you to reach a neighborhood. Regardless, God will use you to accomplish his will and build his church. Church planters are excited because they expect God to do something special through their ministry. Not only do they know that God can use them wonderfully but they believe he will use them. They can feel it in the depth of their soul. Now is their time in history to be used of him to do something special. They expect to serve God’s purpose in this generation—their generation (see Acts 13:36).

**A Venture of Faith**

Church planting is both an exhausting and an exciting faith venture. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that nothing of spiritual significance is accomplished without faith. Indeed, “without faith it is impossible to please God” (NIV). And church planters are men and women of authentic faith who desire more than anything to please God, and they do this, much like the patriarch Abraham, through believing and obeying him. What does that mean? You’ll find the answer in Hebrews 11:8 (NIV): “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

You may or may not know where you’re going to minister—at least initially. Regardless, if God is in it, he’ll let you know in good time. Proverbs 3:5–6 (NIV) is key to this faith and direction. The sage writes, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” The statement “he will make your paths straight” indicates that God will make your direction clear when the time is right. Our job is to trust and acknowledge him.

**A Planned Process**

Starting a church is a dynamic, planned process. It has a beginning but ideally no ending. Starting a church is just that: beginning a ministry that was not already in existence, with the goal that it continue for as long as God is pleased to work through it.

I depict this process in two ways. The first is the organizational life cycle that I presented in the introduction to this book. That cycle instructs us that organizations begin and grow but in time they plateau and eventually die. The idea is for the church to begin and continue to grow with no end in sight. We know that someday God will close the doors of a church, as we discovered in the introduction when we looked at several first-century churches. However,
we don’t begin with the church’s demise in mind. Our focus is on its beginning and growth, not its death.

Another way to think of the process of church planting is focusing on the life stages of a church. Every church works through five stages: conception, development, birth, growth, and reproduction. Here the process is evident, beginning with conception—the idea of starting a church—and continuing through the stages, with the ultimate goal of reproducing other churches or church plants. The plan should be to promote the planting of other church-planting churches.

Occasionally I come across believers who are opposed to planning. The thinking is along the lines that it isn’t spiritual to plan. Nothing could be further from the clear teaching of Scripture. For example, Jesus reveals his plan for the disciples and his church in Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8. Also look up the following passages on planning: Proverbs 14:22; 15:22; 16:9; 19:21; 20:18; 21:31.

Starting and Growing the Church

The goal of church planting is not only to start a church but to see it grow. Churches grow in several ways.

Biological Growth

Churches grow biologically—people having babies. This is good because it signals that the church has young couples that are having babies who are the future of the church. It means the church has a future.

Transfer Growth

Churches grow through people transferring from another church. This can be good or bad. Some people leave one church and attend another because their expectations are too high or they’ve been disciplined and asked to leave. On the other hand, some people leave a church because it is toxic and is doing harm to their faith.

Evangelism Growth

Evangelism growth results when a church is reaching unbelievers with the gospel of Christ. They are saved and join the church. Evangelism is an imperative and key to fulfilling the Great Commission. Unfortunately, few churches are evangelistic, which is one of the major reasons the American church is in crisis.

Spiritual Growth

We can also view church growth from the spiritual perspective. According to Christ’s Great Commission, his church is to grow both numerically and
It is Christ’s desire that his church grow numerically as people come to faith in Christ. But the ultimate objective of the Great Commission is that the church grow spiritually as believers mature over time.

I’ve noted over the years that some people tend to emphasize one type of growth over the other. For example, some small, struggling churches state that they may not be growing numerically but are growing spiritually. This viewpoint is unfortunate because numerical and spiritual growth should work together. In most cases, churches that aren’t growing numerically by reaching lost people aren’t growing spiritually either. And some churches grow numerically but not spiritually. Again, spiritual and numerical growth must complement one another and are not opposed to one another.

Scripture presents a clear theology of numerical growth. Luke records the results and ensuing growth of the church in a number of places in Acts (2:41, 47; 4:4; and many other passages). He uses these numbers to signal that God is at work in and through the Jerusalem Church.

A key question to ask here is what is success, or how should a church plant view success? As stated in this section and depicted in Acts, success is seen in both spiritual and numerical growth, and the latter in most cases reflects the former.

Resting on Jesus’s Promise

Church planting rests on Jesus’s promise in Matthew 16:18 (NIV) that he would build his church: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” What is the promise in this passage? It’s that Jesus is in the church-building business. He is the builder of churches, not us. However, he’s assigned us the pleasure of being a part of the process. Note also that it’s his church that he’s building, not ours. At times we’ve all referred to the church we attend as “our church.” Hopefully, we don’t really mean that. But some do, and that’s where the church gets into trouble. A former student told me of an established church that he pastored in the Northwest where the people had taken ownership of Christ’s church with disastrous results. Thus one Sunday he preached on Matthew 16:18, invited all who would give the church back to Jesus to come forward, and God blessed them.

I must confess that Matthew 16:18 troubled me for a number of years. It says that Jesus will grow or build his church. My problem was how does this square with the declining state of the church in America? I knew that Jesus wasn’t falling down on the job but still I struggled with the promise. Then I was part of a conference where Tony Evans, the pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, was the main speaker. He preached on Matthew 16:18 and explained that maybe the majority of our struggling churches aren’t Christ’s church, at least not the one that he’s building. I believe that Tony is
correct and that this should cause these churches to pause and reflect on what they’re really all about.

**Implementing Christ’s Great Commission**

Church planting is an exhausting but exciting venture of faith, the planned process of starting and growing local churches based on Jesus’s promise to build his church and in obedience to his Great Commission. The Great Commission is Jesus’s mandate for his church. We’re not to start just any kind of church; they should be Great Commission churches. These are churches that take most seriously Jesus’s command to make disciples! Making disciples begins with evangelism and continues with edification or the building up of the saints in the faith with the ultimate goal of their attaining spiritual maturity (Col. 1:28–29; Heb. 5:11–6:1). As I have said, I believe that the failure to pursue Christ’s mandate for his church is one of the primary reasons the American church is in crisis. And when I work with churches that desire revitalization, which is almost every weekend, one of my primary goals is to call them back to what Scripture says they’re supposed to be doing, because so many have wandered from his mandate.

While I’ll address this fully later in chapter 6 on mission, this is obviously the mandate for new churches as well. Of course, new churches don’t have to attempt to woo their people back to the mandate. Instead, they begin with the mandate and encourage those who are responding to some other mandate to find another church that’s more in line with their thinking, as there are plenty of them out there. I argue that a major role of the senior or point pastor of the new church will be to keep the main thing the main thing and not to stray from Christ’s mission for his church.

**The Church**

Most of this chapter is devoted to defining the term church planting, but I must also define the church. If we’re starting churches, it’s imperative that we know what a church is. Scripture speaks of several kinds of churches, such as the universal church made up of all believers and the local church made up of a number of believers who live in a particular geographic locale. It’s the latter concept that I will address here. My definition of the local church is that it’s an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ, who, under leadership, are organized to obey Jesus’s Great Commission by accomplishing certain functions to the glory of God. This is a long but important definition, so I’ll break it down into two broad categories and then address the various components that make up each one.
What Is Church Planting?

What Christ’s Church Is

First, I will address the essence of the church—what it is—and then I will address what it does. The local church is an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ, who, under leadership, are organized.

Indispensable

The essence of Christ’s church is that it is indispensable. Bill Hybels articulates it best when he states that the church is the hope of the world. It’s God’s divine institution or organization that he’s chosen to work through to reach out to and impact our fallen world. As we study the various beliefs and worldviews of those who make up this country, we quickly realize that there are a number of different ideas as to what is the hope of our world as well as our country. Many felt that when the country elected its first black president, Barack Obama, he was the hope of the world. Others believe that politics is the hope of our nation as well as the world. And many people run for political office, hoping to bring broad, sweeping changes to Washington. Still others feel that education, science, or various causes are the hope of the world. The Christian church planter can state without equivocation that Christ and his church are the hope of the world. Again, according to Matthew 16:18, Christ is building his institution—the church—because it’s the only real hope for a lost and dying world.

A Gathering of Professing Believers in Christ

Christ’s church exists as an intentional gathering of people who are “called out” (ekklasia) by God. This means that people have sensed the calling of God and have purposefully come together to seed a new church. Some of these people may be unbelievers as well as believers in Christ. I say this because, in a doctoral class that I took at Dallas Seminary under the leadership of Dr. Charles Ryrie, he challenged us with the question: Is a church not a church if there are unbelievers present in it? He was responding to the students’ definition of the church that included only believers in Christ. As we pondered his question, we realized we needed to include lost people, because it makes sense that most churches likely have a few unbelievers present who profess Christ, but their presence doesn’t change the fact that the organization is a church.

Under Leadership

Scripture indicates that the New Testament churches were under leadership. The most obvious leaders were the apostles (the Twelve) whom Christ trained to be the pillars and leaders of the first-century churches. They and their leadership are prominent throughout the book of Acts (in particular see Acts 6:1–4; 15:1–29; and 15:36–41). Both 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 provide the qualifications for elders who were the first-century house church pastors and leaders.
Scripture also mentions deacons, as found in 1 Timothy 3:8–10. This passage presents only their qualifications but doesn’t address what they do. I suspect that according to the meaning of the term deacon (diakonos means “servant”), they served the early church. It is likely this involved leadership, as they appear to have been elected to their office, hence the necessity for the list of qualifications. Some believe there was a special church office that consisted of women leaders called deaconesses, such as Phoebe in Romans 16:1. Others believe they were simply the wives of deacons (1 Tim. 3:11). Regardless of their role, the fact these women are singled out may indicate that they had some type of leadership role in the church.

Organized

Because I consult with churches and teach at a theological seminary, on occasion I come across well-meaning Christians who believe it’s unspiritual to be organized. Instead they would argue that we should “let go and let God” or “go with the flow” of the Holy Spirit. However, Scripture teaches otherwise. Yes, we are to be led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14), but that doesn’t mean we can’t be organized. Several passages indicate that the early churches were organized for ministry. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:40 Paul addresses the church’s public assembly and says that it’s to be accomplished in a “fitting and orderly way.” That implies organization. In Acts 6:1–6 the Jerusalem Church was facing a potential split in the ranks between the Hebrew and Grecian Jews because the widows of the latter were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. So how did the apostles handle the situation? They organized. The problem seemed to be lack of organization rather than willful disobedience or racial intolerance.

What Christ’s Church Does

The first part of my definition of the church is that it is an indispensable gathering of professing believers in Christ, who, under leadership, are organized. The rest of the definition is just as important. It addresses what the church does: The church is to obey Jesus’s Great Commission by accomplishing certain functions to the glory of God.

Obeys the Great Commission

As I said earlier, the church’s mandate from Christ is the Great Commission as found in such passages as Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47–48; and others. While I’ll devote an entire chapter (chapter 6) to this mandate, the gist of the mission is to make disciples according to Matthew 28:19–20. This is twofold and includes evangelism and edification, the latter leading to maturity.
The church has five primary functions that may be found in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 2:41–47, and supported by other passages as well). They are biblical teaching (2 Tim. 4:2); fellowship (Heb. 10:25); worship (Rom. 12:1; 1 Peter 2:9), which includes prayer, the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, financial giving, praise, and so on; evangelism (Matt. 28:19; 2 Tim. 4:5), which includes the ordinance of baptism; and service or ministry (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12).

Glorifies God

The purpose of the church is to glorify the Triune God (Rom. 15:6; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:31). But what does that mean? The term glorify ranges in meaning from honoring God to valuing him for who he is. While the church is to glorify God within the congregation, I believe that it’s most important that it glorify God in its community before a lost but watching world. The new church is to present Christ and live in such a way in its community that unbelieving people want to know God or at least know more about him.

Church Planters

I’ve defined church planting and the church. However, one more definition is needed for the sake of clarity. Who are church planters? Church planters are those who are involved in church planting as defined in this chapter. They’re men and women who have in some way committed their lives to the exhausting but exciting venture of faith that includes the planned process of starting and growing local churches, based on Jesus’s promise to build his church and in obedience to his Great Commission.

Broadly speaking, this definition would include a number of people. First and most obvious, it describes the individual whom God directs to take the lead in starting a church. Second, it would include the team that the individual recruits to plant a church with him. It would also include those leaders who pastor established churches and have used their churches to train church planters and sponsor church planting.

I’m convinced that the best way for a church planter to launch a church—especially if he doesn’t have a lot of experience—is for a gifted, talented, established church pastor to bring him on staff for a couple of years. During this time, the church planter gains valuable ministry experience, the church covers his salary, and usually he is free to recruit a team of people who will go out from the church and launch a new church with him.

A great example of one who puts this into practice is Leith Anderson, who is the senior pastor of Wooddale Church in Minneapolis. He so wants to encourage church planting that he gives future church planters what he refers
to as a “hunting license.” This means they are free to recruit anyone from the church to be part of the team. This speaks volumes about Leith and indicates that he is not threatened by such an approach, as some pastors would be.

Those who train church planters to start churches are in a sense also church planters. This would include those of us who teach church planting at a seminary or Bible college. It would also include those who train church starters within a particular denomination or network.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your definition of church planting? Does it agree or disagree with the author’s definition? If the latter, how does it differ?
2. If you are currently involved in a church plant or considering becoming involved, are you experiencing a sense of excitement over the prospect? If not, why not? If not, how would the author advise you to proceed?
3. Are you a person of strong faith? Do you find it easy to trust God? Do you trust him for your finances? How do you respond to the idea that church planting is a venture of faith? Does this frighten you, energize you, or a little of both?
4. Do you agree with the author’s definition of the church? If not, explain how you disagree.
5. Which definition of a church planter fits what you believe God has in mind for you? Why or why not?