

# CHURCH PLANTING

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Church planting is the development of new local churches. It is mentioned or implied in many places in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 3:6–7, for example, Paul refers to planting and watering with Apollos, and as we see in the book of Acts, for Paul this meant planting and watering new churches. The primary place to learn about church planting from the Bible is without question the book of Acts.

Before we proceed, however, let's remember something. The Bible's prescriptive statements are normative for us, but we have to approach the descriptive histories of the Old and New Testaments with some caution, because they include both good and bad examples. Are we always sure which is which? The safest approach is to take the church planting practices of Paul in Acts very seriously, but to recognize that these examples are not commands. The Bible is not providing an absolute rule book for church planting in all times and contexts. It is therefore best to look for general principles rather than for detailed practices.

While Acts is not a manual for church planting, we should nonetheless recognize that our present age now resembles Paul's Mediterranean world in many respects. That world was religiously pluralistic, hedonistic, urbanized, and globalized, as is our own. Most cultures, and nearly all cities, are now multiethnic and internationally connected, with multiple vital, religious faith communities in them. Traditional, secular, and pagan worldviews live side by side. Cities are again as influential and central to culture as they were in the Greco-Roman world. Consequently, it has been centuries since Acts has been as directly relevant to the world church. Beginning with the Emperor Constantine's adoption of Christianity, the Christian faith in Europe and then North America became formally and informally supported by the most powerful institutions of society, and religious pluralism largely vanished. Because we live in a pluralistic "Acts-Age" again, however, urban church planting is now as central a strategy for reaching our world as it was in that former one. Thus we need to read Acts more carefully than ever.

## METHODS FOR CHURCH PLANTING

### The naturalness of church planting

In Acts, church planting does not occur as a traumatic or unnatural event. It is not something odd or once-in-a-lifetime, as with most congregations today. Except for the original persecution of Christians in Acts 8, church planting is not forced on people by circumstances. It is a mindset woven into the church's ministry. It happens constantly, normally. Paul never evangelizes and disciples without also church planting.

For decades, expositors have looked to Acts to find the basic elements of Christian ministry. Their lists always include Bible teaching, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and worship. Church planting appears right alongside them—but it is usually left off the list. Implicitly, interpreters have looked at the constant church planting in Acts and said, "Well, that was for then—we don't do that now." In Acts, however, *church planting is natural and constant, not traumatic and episodic*. Paul's ordinary ministry cycle, as seen in Acts 14, shows how natural and normal church planting was. It occurred in three phases.

The first phase was **evangelism**. "They preached the good news in that city" (Acts 14:21). The Greek word for "preach" is not the more ordinary word *kerygma*, but a more comprehensive word, *evangelizomenoi*. It says they "gospelled" the city. This expresses a great deal more than simply preaching sermons. Acts shows Paul spreading the gospel all sorts of ways—through preaching in synagogue services, sharing in small group Bible studies, speaking out in marketplaces, leading discussions in rented halls, or just talking with people one on one.

Next came **incorporation into the community**. In Acts 14:22a, we see Paul "strengthening...and encouraging" the disciples. These two verbs are also linked together elsewhere in Acts (chapters 9 and 15, for example), and John Stott calls them "almost a technical term" for building up new believers.<sup>1</sup> How did Paul do it? He taught them "the faith" (v. 22)—a definite body of beliefs and theology. Moreover, he "congregated" them. New believers were called to assemble regularly and form a community where they could be taught and encouraged to live the Christian life, not only by one another, but by leaders. This led to the next stage of Paul's ministry sequence.

The third phase was **leadership development**. "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church" (14:23). Paul did not continue as the leader of the local community of believers that he had formed through evangelism and discipleship. He gave the oversight of the community to elders, a plurality of leaders selected from among the converts—native to the town and culture—who continued to teach and shepherd the people in the faith. In short, after evangelizing and discipling, Paul routinely organized converts into self-directed churches with their own indigenous leadership. They were not just loose-knit associations directly under him. When Paul began with them they were individual "disciples" (v. 22), but when he left them, they were churches (v. 23).

In the book of Acts, then, church multiplication was as natural as individual convert multiplication.

### **The avenues of church planting**

As Tim Chester points out in his essay "Church Planting: A Theological Perspective," there were two basic launching models for churches in Acts. Church planting was initiated either by pioneer individuals, or by church-planting churches.<sup>2</sup>

Paul and his companions represent **pioneer church planting**. Although Paul was sent out by the Antioch church and was thus accountable to it for his doctrine and behavior (Acts 13), his work in every city was pioneering work. That is, he carried out groundbreaking evangelism in each place, without other churches' direct involvement or labor.

The other model is **churches planting "daughter" churches**. While implicit, this model is unmistakable in the New Testament, if you don't screen it out by thinking anachronistically about the word "church" whenever it appears in the text. The churches Paul planted—in fact, all Christian churches for the first 200 years—were *household* churches.<sup>3</sup>

For example, Lydia's conversion immediately becomes the bridge to conversion for her household, which then makes her home the first church in Philippi (Acts 16:11–15). To meet with the Christians, Paul goes to Lydia's home (Acts 16:40). The same thing happens in Acts 18:8 with the household of Crispus. This means that the church—at Philippi, Corinth, and everywhere else—grew very naturally by multiplying new assemblies or house churches when existing home meetings became too crowded. Even though Paul writes to the "church" (singular) "at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2), it becomes obvious in the epistle that by that term he is actually addressing a number of household churches (that of Chloe in 1:11, Stephanas in 1:16, etc.).

The point for us, as Chester says, is that the household church is the earliest church's basic building block, which in turn means that *church planting was built into the church's very nature*. Growth only came by multiplying new assemblies of Christians, who met under more elders. These two basic approaches continue to operate today, as well. They can be outlined as follows.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 255.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Chester, "Church Planting: A Theological Perspective," in *Multiplying Churches*, ed. Stephen Timmis (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 23–46.

<sup>3</sup> Because Chester and Timmis are involved in house churches, they were quick to notice this in the biblical passages.

### **In pioneer church planting**

New **ministers**/church leaders are self-initiating, though they get support from other local churches.

No core **members**; pioneer leader does all evangelism and gathering of new members.

**Money** from a) mission agency/denomination, b) support raised from friends and churches, c) self-employment, or d) combination.

**Mentors**/supervisors are distant pastors and leaders; seen infrequently.

**Model** is often more innovative, forging new approaches or imitating distant ones.

### **In daughter-church planting**

New **ministers**/church leaders are selected by mother church leaders.

Core **members** from mother church via donated cell groups, or by “hiving off” distant families.

**Money** from a) core group pledge, b) gift from mother church, c) outside grants from distant churches or individuals, or d) combination.

**Mentors**/leaders from mother church are seen frequently; peer supervision often possible.

**Model** is similar to that of mother church, although never completely identical.

Every new church needs one or more sources for the five “Ms” listed in the chart above—**Ministers, Members, Money, Mentors, and Model**. If a new church receives all of these Ms from a single mother church, it is a daughter church. If it receives them from a broad variety of places, gathered by the church planter, then it is a pioneer church. These categories also have variations. For example, a strong church movement will produce new churches that obtain all five Ms from different churches within the same movement, but not necessarily from a single mother church. I would call this neither a pioneer church nor a daughter church but a “movement church plant.” Another hybrid example combining elements of the two categories occurs when a group of people from one church moves together with a minister to another distant location. Exploring these church planting approaches is important *not* to peg or categorize each new work, but to be sure we know clearly where all the necessary elements for the new church are coming from.

## **MINDSET FOR CHURCH PLANTING**

We are not reading the Bible wisely with regard to church planting if we only look for what it says about methodology. The biblical text reveals that a particular mindset is necessary, as well—one that sees church planting as completely natural. When this mindset is present, church planting is as normal as every other ministry in a congregation—and integral with them. In other words, a biblical congregation does Word ministry, educational ministry, music ministry, children’s ministry—and is always in some stage of church planting, as well. Church planting should not be like constructing a church building—one big, traumatic explosion of activity and then everyone is glad it’s over for another thirty years. It should be as regular and routine as every other kind of ministry.

For church planting to be this natural requires a kingdom mindset rather than a tribal one. To make this mindset clear, it is helpful to contrast the unnatural approach of so much church planting with the natural church planting mindset.

### **Unnatural Church Planting**

“Unnatural church planting” crops up in two varieties, depending on what prompts the decision to start a new church. The first variety is “defiant church planting.” Some in the church become frustrated, split away, and form a new church because of alienation over doctrine, or vision, or philosophy of ministry. Examples include charismatic splits over spirituality and gifts, or stylistic splits over music and worship style, or cultural splits in which a younger generation’s leaders leave to form a church very different from the one the older generation’s leaders want, and so on.

The second variety is “reluctant church planting.” Circumstances force church leaders against their will to plant a new church. This situation may develop when a congregation outgrows its landlocked building, and one group of members does not want to move while another group does. Another example occurs when a growing number of longtime church members moves to a new and distant area and then begins lobbying for a church “out here.” Reluctant church planting also happens when an ethnic church’s younger members want to begin a church in the local culture’s language instead of the people group’s mother tongue. Although leaders may give a new church their grudging permission, or even money and active support, it is still unnatural, because church planting won’t recur unless circumstances again dictate it. Often the church plant is not well executed, either, because church planting is not a skill-set the church has sought to acquire.

Some years ago an evangelical congregational church in our metropolitan area faced a problem of overcrowding. It had been filling the 100 seats in its small, historic building twice on Sunday for several years. They resisted church planting, fearing the loss of money, important leaders, and friendships. Finally, they sent fifty members out to a new town to form a new church. Just two years later, 350 were attending the daughter church. Meanwhile, after only three weeks the mother church was again filling its 100 seats twice a Sunday. After this experience, the church leaders kicked themselves. They realized that during this time frame they could have planted two and maybe three daughter churches, bringing nearly 1,000 people into the church family. Had they grown to that size, they would have been better able to do missions, youth ministry, and many other things together. They realized they had needed to transition from unnatural church planting to a church planting mindset.

### **Natural Church Planting**

How then do we cultivate the mindset of Paul, who always did evangelism, discipleship, *and* church planting? This mindset can be broken down into three important substrata. If you can’t muster these, you won’t have a natural church planting mindset. You first need the ability to **give away and lose control of money, members, and leaders**. It may be a cliché, but it’s true: Paul “empowered” these new leaders. He gave them ownership, and thus he lost a great deal of control. This transfer poses a huge barrier for churches that cannot bear the thought of money-giving families, key leaders, or friends being “lost” from their church body. Ministers are also afraid to give away glory. If your ministry adds people and you assimilate them into your church, turn them into Bible study groups under your church, and spin them into new ministry activities in your church, it swells your numbers and you gain more control and glory. If you organize them into churches, however, you lose money, members, numbers, leaders, and control. But that is exactly what Paul did.

You also need the ability to **give up some control of the shape of the ministry itself**. This is scary, especially to people who care about biblical truth, but it’s a simple fact that the new church will not look just like the one that planted it. It will develop its own voice and emphases. The reference in Acts to “the” faith (14:22) means there is one body of true doctrine, so pains must certainly be taken to ensure basic doctrinal unity between the mother body and the daughter. On the other hand, to insist that the church be a clone of the one that planted it is to be unwilling to admit the biblical reality of contextualization. Different generations and cultures *will* produce different kinds of churches. We may agree to this intellectually but then find it difficult emotionally to watch the reality unfold.

An additional problem must be mentioned. When you let go, you lose direct control of the church, its leaders and people, but you can’t really avoid responsibility for its problems. If problems arise within the new church anytime during the five to ten year period after it is planted, many will consider the mother church obligated to help with the difficulty, or will hold the mother church responsible for it to some extent. It is not unlike being the parent of adult children: you are not allowed to directly tell them what to do, but if there’s a problem, you are expected to help clean it up.

Paul appointed elders in each church and gave these elders a certain amount of independence, but let’s not make a mistake here. The church planting mindset is not so much a matter of trusting new leaders, but of trusting God. Paul did not give the new churches up to themselves or to others. Rather, he “committed them to the Lord”

(Acts 14:23). His heart and character were such that he did not need to keep control. This means the church planting mindset requires spiritual maturity and growth in understanding the gospel.

Third, you need the ability to **care for the kingdom even more than for your tribe**. In Paul's life, we see this in striking ways. Paul spoke of Apollos in the warmest terms (1 Cor. 3:6; 16:12), even though Apollos was not a disciple of Paul's (Acts 18:24–28), and Apollos' disciples evidently considered themselves a unique party (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4). We also see that Paul constantly took his hands off new churches ("Then they left," Acts 16:40). Although different apostles had their followers and distinct emphases, Paul's concern was not for his own power or for his party's, but for the kingdom as a whole.

The appearance of a new church in a community usually tests the "kingdom-mindedness" of existing churches. New churches draw most of their new members from the ranks of the unchurched (see below), but they will inevitably attract some people out of existing churches. When an existing church loses two families to a new church that brings in 100 other people who weren't attending any church at all, that older church has a choice to make. Will it resent the eight people they lost, or rejoice in the 100 people the kingdom has gained? In other words, our attitude to new church development is a test of whether our mindset is geared to our own institutional turf, or to the overall health and prosperity of the kingdom of God in the city. Any church that is more upset by its own small losses than the kingdom's large gains is betraying its narrow interests. As the next section demonstrates, however, new church planting also offers very great benefits to older congregations, even if that may not be obvious initially.

## REASONS FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Christians do not pick up a church-planting mindset simply by being exposed to the biblical pattern in Acts. They may in fact object to reading Acts the way described here: "That was then! Now, at least in North America and Europe, we have churches all over the place. We don't need to start new churches—we should strengthen and fill the existing churches before we do that." Answering this very common objection are five practical reasons why church planting is crucial to the church's mission anywhere at all.

### **1. The best way to evangelize a city is not through evangelistic programs but through fully evangelistic churches.**

Evangelism encourages people make a decision to become Christians. Experience, however, shows that many of these "decisions" never take hold or change lives. Why? Many evangelistic decisions are not spiritual conversions; they are a good commitment to start a journey, to seek after God. (I am not saying that a "sinner's prayer" cannot be the moment of new birth, only that oftentimes it is not.) People usually come to full faith through a process of mini-decisions. This means they must continually re-hear the gospel in the context of a worshiping and shepherding community in order to be sure of finally coming home into vital, saving faith. The problem is that older churches often are poor incubators for inquirers and doubters. Evangelistically minded Christians often respond by starting more focused evangelistic programs, but then find these churches are not receptive to the interested people they direct to them. What the city needs is not just evangelism programs, but thoroughly evangelistic churches. This explains why a leading missiologist like C. Peter Wagner can say, "Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven."<sup>4</sup> The next point addresses why they are so effective.

### **2. The best way to increase the number of Christians in a city is not through church renewal but through church planting.**

Older congregations, even when they are growing, increase mainly through transfer growth. Stronger programs can attract believers who are suffering elsewhere under poor preaching, poor discipleship offerings, and so on. Even so, studies confirm again and again that new congregations gain on average 60 to 80 percent of their new adult members from people who were not previously active in any worshiping body, while the majority of long

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<sup>4</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth: Tools for Effective Mission and Evangelism* (Glendale: Regal, 1987), 168.

established congregations gain most of their new adult members by transfer from other congregations.<sup>5</sup> This means the average new congregation brings new people into the life of the body of Christ at many times the rate of an older congregation of the same size. Why would this be?

As a congregation ages, powerful, internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and to a great degree desirable. Older congregations are inevitably controlled by the people groups that have been part of the neighborhood for a long time. They do not include—nor do they open their leadership ranks readily to—members of the area’s new and growing people groups, such as new ethnic groups and new generations. Older congregations have a stability and steadiness that many people (especially long-term residents) thrive on and need. They also enjoy the trust of the broader local community. More established, long-time residents of a town will probably be reached for Christ only by stable, respectable churches with long roots in the community.

Nevertheless, these same dynamics explain why most congregations in the U.S. are in numerical decline. Older congregations, of necessity, focus on the needs and sensibilities of the churching and the long-term residents, even at the expense of any appeal to the unchurched or newer groups and generations. New congregations, by contrast, have no tradition to bow to. They are forced to focus on their *nonmembers*’ needs, simply to get off the ground.

Transfer growth only moves Christians in a city around from one church to another; therefore, the only way to significantly increase the number of Christians in a city overall is by significantly increasing the number of new churches. To illustrate this point, imagine Town A, Town B, and Town C are the same size, and each has 100 churches. In Town A, all the churches are more than twenty years old, which ordinarily means the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in that town is shrinking. This is the case even though four or five of the churches have become “hot” and their attendance has increased. In Town B, only one church is under ten years old. Even though this church is bringing in more unchurched people than the rest, and a couple of renewed older congregations will also be winning new people to Christ, most likely this growth will only offset the normal declines of the other older churches. Thus, the overall number of active Christian churchgoers in Town B is staying the same. Finally, in Town C, three of the churches are under ten years old. In this town, the overall number of active Christian churchgoers is on a path to grow. If three new churches can be planted per year, approximately 100 churches would be added in a generation, and the body of Christ in Town C would grow substantially.<sup>6</sup>

This little mental exercise is quite simplistic. We know that revivals can occur and can lead to dramatic, evangelistic church growth through the renewed churches. Nevertheless, the basic principle is important to grasp. Besides, the history of revivals shows that renewal always leads to a great deal of church planting.

### **3. The best way to renew the existing churches of a city is by planting new ones.**

When discussing new church development, the question often arises, “But what about all the churches in the city that need help? Shouldn’t you be working to strengthen and renew the existing churches before you plant new ones?” The answer is that planting new churches *is* one of the best ways to renew the existing churches.

First, new churches bring **new ideas** to the whole body of Christ. They are free to be innovative, since no one can say, “We’ve never done it that way before.” They therefore become the “Research and Development” department for the rest of the body of Christ in the city. Often older congregations, originally convinced that a

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<sup>5</sup> Lyle Schaller, quoted in Donald Anderson McGavran and George G. Hunter III, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 100.

<sup>6</sup> Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 12. Schaller talks about a “1 percent goal” Each year any association of churches should plant new congregations at the rate of 1 percent of its existing total; otherwise, that association will be in decline. One percent is just “maintenance,” so to grow substantially in a generation, an association must plant 2–3 percent yearly.

particular approach would “not work here,” observe after a time that a new church in the area is succeeding wildly with the new method, and they gain the courage to try it themselves.

Second, new churches surface **new Christian leaders** for the whole city. Older congregations find leaders through tenure and kinship ties, and that means many leaders who are newer to the community are overlooked. Also, older congregations favor leaders who support tradition and routine. New congregations, on the other hand, attract a higher percentage of those who value creativity, risk, innovation, and future orientation. They attract many people and harness many gifts that would otherwise not be utilized in the body’s work. These new leaders eventually benefit the whole body of Christ in that city.

Third, new churches challenge other churches to go to **new depths of self-examination**. Often a new congregation’s growth brings about humility and repentance in older congregations for their defeatist and pessimistic attitudes. Sometimes it is only in contrast with a new church that older churches can finally define their own vision, specialties, and identity. And sometimes, a daughter church does so well that the mother church is renewed through its offspring’s influence, enthusiasm, and vision. New leaders, new ministries, added members, and additional income sometimes “wash back” into the mother church in various ways to strengthen and renew it. Although seeing good friends and some leaders leave to form a new church may have caused some pain, the mother church usually experiences a surge of high self-esteem and an influx of new, enthusiastic leaders and members.

Fourth, the new church may be an “**evangelistic feeder**” for an entire community. New churches often produce many converts who wind up in older churches for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the new church is very exciting and outward-facing, but is also unstable or immature in its leadership. Some converts cannot stand the major changes that regularly occur in the new church, and they move to an existing church for stability. Sometimes the new church reaches a person for Christ, but the new convert quickly discovers that he or she does not comfortably “fit” the socioeconomic make-up of the new congregation, and gravitates to an established congregation where the customs and culture feel more familiar. Ordinarily, a city’s new churches produce new members not only for themselves, but for the older bodies as well.

In summary, vigorous church planting is one of the best ways to *renew* the existing churches of a city, as well as the best single way to *grow* the entire body of Christ in a city.

#### **4. The best way to reach the sheer diversity of the city is through new churches.**

New churches are the best single way to reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups. Younger adults have always been disproportionately found in newer congregations. Long-established congregations develop traditions (time of worship, length of service, emotional responsiveness, sermon topics, leadership style, emotional atmosphere, and thousands of other tiny customs and mores) that reflect the sensibilities of long-time leaders from the older generations, who have the influence and money to control the church’s life. But the sensibilities of those in power do not reach younger generations.

Additionally, new residents are almost always reached better by new congregations. Older congregations may require membership tenure of at least ten years before allowing a person into places of leadership and influence, but in a new church, new residents tend to have equal power with long-time area residents. Newer Christians and newer residents move into leadership more quickly, and their voices are heard in ways that would not happen in an older congregation.

Moreover, new socio-cultural groups in a community are always better reached by new congregations. For example, if new white-collar commuters move into an area where the older residents were farmers, a new church will be better at applying the gospel to the new residents’ questions and interests, while the older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group. New racial groups are also best reached by a new church that is intentionally multiethnic in its leadership from the start. To illustrate, if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33 percent Puerto Rican, a new, deliberately biracial church will be far more likely to

create cultural space for newcomers than will an older church that has a long-tenured, all-Anglo leadership board. Finally, brand new immigrant groups can almost always be reached only by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait until a new immigrant group is sufficiently assimilated into the existing culture and language, we will wait for years before that group hears the gospel.

This means, then, that church planting is not for frontier regions or “pagan” countries alone. Because our societies are much more mobile and fluid, and since the cultural distance between generations seems as big as ever, and especially since our urban neighborhoods are constantly changing, the body of Christ in a city will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting even to maintain itself at the same size and level of vitality. New churches are far better able to reach the constant stream of new generations, new immigrant groups, and new residents that come to a city. A single church, no matter how large, will never be able to serve the needs of a diverse city. Only a movement of hundreds of churches, small and large, can penetrate literally every neighborhood and people group in a city.

### **5. New churches are the only ministries that become self-supporting and expand the base for all other ministries in a city.**

A city needs many ministries: youth work, campus ministry, schools, programs that help the poor, evangelistic outreaches to new groups, and so on. All are them, however, serve constituencies that cannot financially support ministry staff and workers. Even after such ministries get underway, they need outside funding from Christian givers indefinitely.

A new church, however, only requires outside funding at its beginning. Within a few years, it becomes self-supporting, and then it becomes the source of Christian giving to other ministries. Because new churches bring large numbers of non-churched people into the life and work of the kingdom, church planting is by far the fastest way to grow the number of new givers to the city’s kingdom work. New church development, then, is the ‘tide that lifts all boats’ and offers the best way to help all the other ministries in a city thrive and grow. They need a constant stream of new Christian volunteers, workers, and givers to keep them going, and new churches are the headwaters of that stream.

### **Historical Case Study: The U.S.**

Lyle Schaller’s book on church planting uses the history of church growth in the U. S. as a case study for all we have been saying about the importance of church planting. In 1860, one Protestant church existed for every 875 residents in the United States. From 1860 to 1906, however, U.S. Protestant churches planted one new church for every increase of 350 in the population, bringing the ratio to one church for every 430 persons. In 1906, more than half of all the country’s religious bodies were fewer than thirty years old.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the percentage of people involved in the life of the church rose steadily. For example, U. S. religious adherence in 1776 was 17 percent of the population, but that figure rose to 53 percent by 1916.<sup>8</sup>

After World War I, however, church planting plummeted, especially among mainline Protestants. This occurred for a variety of reasons. One key reason was the issue of “turf.” Once the continental U.S. was covered by towns and settlements, with churches and church buildings from the major denominations in each one, older congregations strongly resisted having any new churches planted in “our neighborhood.” As shown earlier, new churches tend to be very effective at reaching new people and growing during their first few decades, but the vast majority of U.S. congregations peak in size during this time frame and then remain on a plateau or slowly shrink.<sup>9</sup> When the demographics begin to change, older congregations are not as good at reaching new residents, new generations, and new socioeconomic groups, but they are usually unaware of the social changes taking place and feel threatened by any suggestion that another church could reach the newer people better than they. Additionally, mainline churches, such as Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian, were more centralized and

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<sup>7</sup> Schaller, *44 Questions*, 14–20.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1992), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Schaller, *44 Questions*, 23.



hierarchical in their organizational structures, and therefore older congregations had more resources to politically block the development of new churches in their area. As a result, only the more independent or congregational groups were free to plant churches. Baptist, independent, and evangelical churches therefore grew far faster in the twentieth century than did mainline denominations. The mainline churches have shrunk remarkably in the last twenty to thirty years.<sup>10</sup>

What are the historical lessons? Overall, church attendance and adherence in the United States are decreasing. This situation cannot be reversed by any other means than the way they *increased* so remarkably in the first place. We must plant churches at such a rate that the number of churches per 1,000 persons in the population begins to grow again, rather than decline, as it has since the first World War.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the body of Christ in any city, as well as for the continual renewal of a city's existing churches. Nothing else has the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. The biblical, sociological, and historical evidence strongly supports new church planting as being the very heart of the Christian mission.

Ultimately, we look not to Paul to learn the importance of church planting, but to Jesus himself. Jesus, the supreme church planter, builds his church and does it effectively, because hell itself will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). He raises up leaders and gives them the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19). He establishes his converts on the word of the confessing apostle, Peter—that is, on the Word of God (Matt. 16:18). When we plant churches, we are participating in his work, and if we have any success at all, it's because “neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor. 3:7).

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<sup>10</sup> Most evangelicals charge liberal theology as the reason the mainline has shrunk, but Schaller demonstrates that another reason (though probably not unrelated) is the lack of church planting (Schaller, *44 Questions*, 24–26). Finke and Stark show how independent churches, such as the Baptists, who have had freedom to plant churches without interference, have proliferated (*Churching*, 248).

<sup>11</sup> Mark A. Noll has recently argued that during the nineteenth century, virtually all church denominations in the U.S. grew faster than the population—it was one of the greatest expansions of the Christian church in history. See *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 112. He attributes this to a Christianity that was more voluntarist and entrepreneurial, and much less dependent on the formal and legal intermingling of church and society that was the basis for church life in Europe. At the heart of this entrepreneurial Christianity was church planting.