

Why do I focus so much on developing healthy, evangelistic, missionary churches?

By Bob Young

[Note: parts of this article are from previous notes, but I failed to note the original source]

I was in Colombia in August 2016, and the local church I was visiting told me how some people in another city had become believers when one of the local members shared the gospel with members of his extended family. With six new believers in a location far away, what is to be done? The local church decided they should help these new Christians by facilitating a strong beginning for the new church. Six members (3 teams) in the local church are willing to rotate a weekend responsibility. They have to drive 7 hours on Friday, spend Saturday and Sunday morning, and drive back 7 hours Sunday evening so they can go to work on Monday. They anticipate that other members will also be willing assist so that the new church grows in healthy ways.

In a similar case, a few weeks ago a Honduran church that is only about five years old saw the need to plant another church in a nearby city.

In both of these cases, the only requests received from the local churches were for assistance with minimal funding to buy gasoline, if possible.

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus told his first followers to go and make disciples among all the nations (Matt. 28:18-20). The early church understood that these words were not only for the apostles who heard them firsthand. The early church took seriously the commission, so that when they were scattered from Jerusalem in Acts 8:1-4, they went everywhere preaching the word. Paul and other missionaries actively took the gospel to other places and churches were begun. These final words of Jesus continue to guide faithful followers of Jesus today.

The Gospel has always advanced by God's people taking seriously Jesus' final commission: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15). Good news is for sharing. And notice the results: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them" (Acts 2:41).

When the gospel was preached on the day of Pentecost, people from many nations heard and were baptized. The New Testament church was born with an overflow of new converts, with 3000 new Christians becoming part of the new family of God on that first day. God had a plan for these new believers and immediately they began to participate in shared activities every day that allowed them to enjoy, develop, and grow in their new faith. "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). The larger context of Acts 2 notes that they were testifying publicly about Jesus the Messiah, living out faith together, and assembling on a daily basis (not weekly) in homes.

God added these new believers to the church. We must assume that when they returned to their homes churches began. (I do not say churches were established because that terminology

suggests the church as an institution rather than as an organism.) When the gospel is preached and people are baptized, they become part of the church. If they live in a place where no church exists, they begin to assemble and a new local church begins. One way to fulfill Jesus' command to go into all the world making disciples is to help plant local churches, as shown in the New Testament.

The rapid growth in Jerusalem and the scattering of the Christians into many other places meant that new spiritual leaders were needed to provide care and oversight for God's family. These leaders were "thrust" into new positions. I use the word **thrust** because it is the word Jesus used in Matthew 9:38 for 'sending' laborers into the harvest. It is a word that shows force and urgency. Where growth is occurring and fruitfulness is flourishing, the local church must and can develop in healthy ways. Members become teachers, leaders, and proclaimers as they recognize God's gifting and calling in their lives. The gospel message is shared by the members, just not by a select few. As a result, more and more new churches are planted.

Peter Wagner, missiologist and author says, "The simple, most effective evangelistic method under heaven is planting churches." International Director of Gospel for Asia, K. P. Yohanan writes,

"In the New Testament, while the saving of individuals is significant, it is so because such evangelism is a necessary part of planting churches. You cannot plant churches without evangelizing, but you can evangelize without bringing new congregations into being. I am not implying that para-church organizations are necessarily misguided. But I am saying that they should not see their ministries as an end in themselves, but as valuable only to the extent to which they help strengthen existing churches and to plant new ones."

In light of the need to plant churches in unreached areas of the world, he goes on to say, "What is missionary work all about? ... to do good, to preach the Gospel, to save souls, to heal the sick, to baptize bodies are all good and true answers, but fall short of what stands out a mile in the New Testament account in Acts. What did the first apostolic missionaries like Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy actually do? Certainly they did preach and teach, heal and serve — but why? For what purpose? Not just to save individual souls. Acts is absolutely clear. They planted churches."

That is the process: strengthening local churches with an eye to healthy development of leaders and members, focusing on developing evangelistic missionary churches, and assisting in the planting of new churches. Why? Because planting new churches is one of the most effective evangelism and mission tools available to the contemporary church!