

Excursus: How Church-Planting Strategies Can Derail Movements to Christ

by R. W. Lewis

I have discussed previously, in my article, “Losing Sight of the Frontier Mission Task” (p. 5), how counting churches planted instead of indigenous movements leads to the inaccurate categorizing of unreached people groups. However, much more serious problems result when we consider how this change affects mission strategy.

Church planting is a term promoted for decades in the American church-growth movement. Typically, it assumes an *aggregate attractional church-formation model*—winning people to Christ, then aggregating these former strangers into a group. In this model, church planters hope to create a church large enough to attract more non-believers who then come to faith in church meetings. Individuals coming to Christ are inadvertently extracted from their families and friendship networks.

Forming a new community becomes the goal of church-planting—a community based on meetings and programs. In many non-Western contexts, these new communities rarely replace all that the family networks provided, such as jobs and spouses. If there is conflict, these believers may be forced to recant to survive.

In the church-planting model, individual believers, instead of winning their families, often become alienated from them. Then the job of reaching out to non-believers is unconsciously transferred to the church and its leaders. Focus is diverted away from natural evangelism and discipleship; instead, it becomes a priority to have a worship team or a preacher good enough to attract new people.

A distinctly different missiological strategy is needed in achieving the goal of reproducing movements among frontier people groups. We need to see how church planting can actually derail new infant movements to Christ.

Ways Church Planting Can Undermine Movements in Christian-Identity People Groups

I want to first show how this has happened among Christianized people groups. I will try to quickly synthesize some general missiological observations from Christian history, though brief and therefore perhaps a bit simplistic.

1. *Church planting tends to add denominations instead of starting movements.* Historically, missionary outreach to extensively Christianized areas has mostly consisted of setting up competing churches. This method has typically been followed regardless of the denomination sending the missionaries (Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical, etc.). Having many different types of churches is sometimes helpful, if the new churches are reaching disaffected and unchurched segments of the population—especially if good relations instead of acrimony can be attained between the new and old denominations, and it is not seen as “sheep stealing.”
2. *Church planting can increase opposition to the gospel.* Greater resistance to the gospel can result by using oppositional approaches to unrevived churches. For example, when the Reformation caused a split, opposition triggered the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which set in cement centuries of Catholic antipathy toward Protestant theology, practice, and even Bible translation. The separatist church movements in Europe, such as the Anabaptists, Pietists, and Puritans were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants.
3. *Church planting undermines the potential for movements by extracting individuals from their families to create new communities.* Planting evangelical churches, in the typical way described above, can be very counterproductive because it extracts people from their nominally-Christian families and existing Christian denominations. By creating antipathy to renewal in their families, the possibility of a movement taking off is decreased. Even with house churches, starting competing fellowships often splits not just churches but families as well. We need to try to avoid increasing the resistance to the gospel that we so often lament in these nominally Christianized people groups. If widespread opposition results in the people group, it shuts down the possibility of starting a movement and can get the missionary expelled from the country.
4. *Church planting diverts mission efforts, perpetuating flawed strategies instead of starting renewal movements.* Unfortunately, the recent emphasis on church-planting has increasingly encouraged evangelical missionaries to see success *only* in terms of a *new* church. The former faith community is seen as inadequate for salvation and the new faith is seen as genuine; the other denominations are “old wine skins” and the newer church plants are “new wine skins” (Luke 5:37). The assumption is that new denominations are *required* for revival, which is not the case.
5. *If we focus on counting churches planted, even large movements will not affect the unreached status of these Christian-identity groups because there are no new church structures to count.* Therefore, people belonging to renewal movements within Anglican, Lutheran, and Mar Thoma Indian Churches, who all have orthodox Protestant Trinitarian beliefs, would not be counted as a percentage of the evangelicals—much less the charismatic renewal movements within Orthodox or Catholic groups.

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Alternatives To Church Planting Successfully Launch Renewal Movements in Christianized Cultures

1. *Direct evangelism of church members by their leaders who have themselves come to a renewed faith is the most common form of renewal movements in older denominations.* The best modern examples are the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, which have spread into multiple denominations and are the fastest growing form of Christianity today (according to Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom*¹). Other recent examples are the Welsh revival or the revivals under Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, or D. L. Moody. Though fervor rarely lasts more than 50 years, all have had a long-term impact.

Regardless of the current secularization and deplorable state of faith in post-Christian Europe and other previously-Christianized peoples, they are nevertheless not in any worse state than has existed many times before in history. These groups have hundreds of years of exposure to Christianity and the Bible in their own languages and God is faithful to revive these groups. Historically, in such people groups, revivals have not come from foreign missionaries but through God raising up leaders among them to bring revival, like he raised up prophets in Israel.

Therefore, finding and supporting the people who can become the seeds of renewal in their own denominations is crucial, and here I include both Catholic and Orthodox parishes as well as Protestant. God is already working in many denominations through Spirit-led or charismatic movements. The Alpha Course has been very helpful in renewing faith from within. We can support Bible study movements in these churches, and publication of materials, etc., whether we join that church or not.

2. *New structures that develop within the older churches are the second most successful source of renewal of older denominations.* To be most successful, such structures need to develop alongside the church while affirming church membership, like disciple-making Bible studies and prayer movements. My grandparents were won to the Lord through the Christian Endeavor movement, an interdenominational youth revival movement that began in 1881 in one church and subsequently grew to over a million in a decade. It went global, impacting 67,000 churches by 1906,² and is still in existence today, though its impact has been almost eclipsed by the hiring of professional youth pastors in local churches.

The Evangelical Awakening (mentioned previously in footnote 21) is an excellent example of an effective renewal movement that can be copied. Winning hundreds of thousands, it transformed England and even led to the abolition of slavery. The German Pietists tried to get Wesley to split off his movement early on from his denomination, the Anglican church, but he refused to start new churches, or to baptize or marry people, and for fifty years he worked towards the revival of people within the Church of England. When the movement jumped to America, it formed a distinct denomination, which eventually caused the English “Methodists” to also form their own denomination. However, to this day, the Anglican Church of England bears evidence of the blessing of this movement, especially in its overseas churches.

Therefore, I suggest we can take a lesson from Christian history that *true evangelical faith does not have to be separatist*. A new faith does not need to establish its own separate churches in areas where people already have an existing Christian identity. The five pillars of evangelical faith (only scripture, only faith, only grace, only through Christ, and to the glory of God alone), and the hallmarks of the Evangelical Awakening (personal conversion, revivalism, and deep, lasting social reform), are seen in the global Protestant missionary movement that began in the wake of these revivals. Over the last 200 years, these characteristics of renewed faith have impacted the entire world and are still being used as vessels of renewal within formerly dead churches.

Ways Church Planting Can Undermine Movements in Frontier People Groups

Now let’s turn to planting churches in frontier people groups, which is significantly different than planting churches where there are already believers. These frontier people groups still need cross-cultural evangelism—either cross-cultural mission work by those from nearby cultures (E2) or by cross-cultural missionaries from distant cultures (E3). This need is very different than what is needed in post-Christian and Christianized people groups, who need E0 and E1 evangelism (renewal and outreach by the believers from within their culture).

1. *Tracking churches planted gives a false impression of progress toward movements.* If our demography is tracking the number of evangelical churches planted then that is what our missionaries will seek to do. Most evangelical church plants still consist of aggregate churches, made up of people who have been extracted or expelled from

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their families and communities and who as a result have little remaining influence with them. Because this is the case, movements are unlikely to result no matter how contextualized the new church is.

For example, in North Africa, my husband and I discovered it was fairly easy to pull together random unrelated believers into a small Bible study group and call it a church. Coming from the West, where church-planting is usually seen as a gathering-of-a-group process, our flawed ecclesiology set us on a doomed course. We thought we were making progress toward a movement.

We wrongly assumed that a contextualized church, even if members were extracted from their families/networks, was the same as an indigenous church and would automatically spread. Not true. We found that such aggregate church-groups, made up of former strangers, no matter how contextual, were born sterile. They did not propagate. They did not turn into a self-sustaining indigenous movement. Most aggregate groups died in less than ten years or hung on without multiplying.

2. *Forming a new contextualized church competes with the maintenance of familial relationships.* As it turned out, helping new believers maintain their existing relationships with their family and friends was more important for replication than contextualizing religious forms to the culture. Until the yeast of the gospel begins to spread through whole families and whole communities, the people group itself will not be reached, no matter how many church plants are started.

We did not understand that the most important thing is not what *forms* are being used, but *how* the gospel is spreading and is perceived. The people group is reached when they see the gospel as “our faith” not “the foreigners’ faith,” and spreads rapidly from family to family, as finally happened in China.

3. *Our demographics can inadvertently promote extraction evangelism.* The irony is that genuine indigenous movements to Christ are less likely to be recognized or show up as progress in our databases if we singularly track churches planted. Only aggregate churches of extracted believers will look like progress, even though they actually are not. So, tracking the number of evangelical churches planted leads to inaccurate conclusions and flawed mission strategies in *both* Christianized and unreached people groups.

Dan Scribner of Joshua Project has rightly pointed out that we can think of “reached-ness” in terms of the capacity within a people group to evangelize the rest of that group. This capacity requires that those becoming believers are still considered belongers and have ongoing relationships with the rest of their people group. They may not even look like “real Christians” since they don’t appear like the other extracted Westernized Christian believers who may have come from their people, though their faith is equally genuine.

Even if believers reach 2% of the population in an unreached people group, it has proved insufficient to result in ongoing movements if they are a part of encapsulated churches of extracted believers. Unfortunately, this result happened in Japan and in a number of Indian people groups, where the gospel then ceased to spread. After a few generations, Christian Japanese have become essentially a new separate people group. For a people group to be reached, it must acknowledge at some point that many of their own people are following Christ, even if there is ongoing resistance.

In Conclusion

If current definitions of progress with UPGs narrowly define progress in terms of planting new churches, they inadvertently promote extraction evangelism because the only way to succeed in getting a people group off of the UPG list is to draw people out of their families and communities into new distinct, evangelical churches. So, for example, in Scotland, France, or Spain, no movement to Christ will count (on some of these demographic databases) unless extracted evangelical churches are being planted. In Hindu or Muslim areas likewise, workers will be encouraged to pull disparate believers together into churches that can be counted rather than to start disciple-making movements of witnesses with no traditional church structures.

All this is to say that counting the number of evangelical churches planted sets us on bad missiological rails in both Christianized/post-Christian people groups and in frontier unreached people groups. It distracts from the only definitive question: is there a self-sustaining indigenous movement to Christ in this people group, capable of reaching the rest of the whole group, or not? It is very encouraging to hear that the IMB is moving toward using this criterion for unreached people groups.

Although there has been some attempt lately to explain the term church planting in ways that would include indigenous

movements in both these types of people groups, there is still an unhelpful expectation that at some point these movements need to become distinct churches. It would appear that a reproducing evangelical faith is insufficient. Some say these movements must separate themselves from their communities, forming a new and different body of believers rather than continuing as yeast in the dough. According to Rodney Stark, in his book *The Rise of Christianity*, the Jewish believers of “the Way” remained in non-believing Jewish synagogues for over 150 years before leaving and joining the Gentile churches. As a result, his research indicates that nine out of the ten million Jews of that period came to faith. Once they left the synagogues, animosity between the Jews and the Christians increased greatly.³

Separating part of the people from the rest of their people group and community has *not* been the way most people groups have been won to Christ in mission history, or even in modern evangelical outreach, for example in Korea or in tribal groups. Doing so has, in most cases, resulted in Christianity ultimately being rejected by the people group, and then a new generation of missionaries has to start over again. Christ himself said that the kingdom of God would spread quietly and inexorably like yeast in the dough . . . so why can't we expect that is how he plans to build his church? **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹As Harvey Cox showed in *Fire From Heaven*, Pentecostal expansion across the Southern Hemisphere has been so astonishing as to justify claims of a new reformation . . . by most accounts membership in Pentecostal and independent churches already runs into the hundreds of millions. . . Within a few decades such denominations will represent a far larger segment of global Christianity and just conceivably a majority. . . Since there were only a handful of Pentecostals in 1900, and several hundred million today, is it not reasonable to identify this as perhaps the most successful social movement of the past century?” Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7–8.

²Wikipedia, s.v. “Young People’s Society of Christian Endeavour,” last modified November 8, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_People%27s_Society_of_Christian_Endeavour. Wikipedia referenced Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows Up; a History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 151–168.

³Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1996), 49–71.



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