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What You Don't Know Might Hurt You!

The Assumptions of Church Planting

At first, Bill Smith couldn't understand why one of his classmates from seminary reacted so negatively to his vision. Initially, this person had shown an interest in church planting and becoming a part of Bill's team. However, he quickly backed off when he heard Bill's vision for planting a large church. He didn't like big churches! Instead, he believed that the churches in the New Testament were small, and he wasn't comfortable with the idea of planting what could be a large church. Also he felt that Bill overemphasized the role of evangelism in church planting. He believed that there should be more emphasis on Bible knowledge. "What people need today is content!" he explained. Suddenly Bill realized the nature of the problem. They held different assumptions about church planting.

It's most important that those who make up a church-birthing team examine their assumptions as they consider starting a church. Anyone who begins a ministry does so with certain practical and theological assumptions that are either consciously or subconsciously in place. These assumptions are important because they affect the initial planting of the new church and its survival. The following six assumptions will undergird all that is said about church planting in the rest of this book. These assumptions are basic and important to the planting of biblically based, Great Commission churches.

The Importance of Evangelism

The first assumption is that evangelicals are going to have to take evangelism seriously if they're going to plant biblically based, spiritually healthy churches. This seems to be a rather strange statement because evangelical churches and organizations are, after all, supposed to be evangelistic.

Churches and Schools Are Weak in Evangelism

Studies indicate that little evangelism is taking place in most American evangelical churches. In 1990 George Barna wrote: "In the past seven years, the proportion of adults who have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior (34%) has not increased."¹ This figure hasn't changed for the better in the twenty-first century. Also the fact that 80 percent to 85 percent of the churches are plateaued or declining signals a need for a greater emphasis on reaching lost people.

It's discouraging to examine the catalogs of some Christian colleges and evangelical seminaries for classes and field education work in the area of evangelism. Unfortunately, studies and fieldwork in this critical area are sadly lacking, especially in the seminaries.² The problem is that these institutions are training many of those who will assume key leadership positions in various church and parachurch ministries.

Those who teach in these institutions must constantly remind themselves that the three to five years that students spend in school are formative years during which they are developing the values that give shape to their future ministry. If a theoretical approach is valued over a practical approach during these formative years, the early ministry years will reflect this fact. The result is that pastors will spend much of their time in their study and little time with people. While schools are by nature academic institutions, they must strive to create more of a balance between the theoretical and the practical. The seminary professor would be wise to heed the words of Calvin Guy who asked: "Does his theology motivate men who go into all the world and make disciples?"³

Several larger evangelistic churches have observed this tendency and have responded by discouraging prospective pastors from attending seminary altogether. Instead, they bring the most promising people on staff and train them within the local church. While this has some advantages, it also has its disadvantages.⁴ In these difficult days for both seminaries and churches, I believe that the answer lies in a revision of how we do theological education with a better balance between the two.

Evangelism Accomplishes Church Growth

Church growth people indicate that there are three ways that a local church can grow numerically. The first kind of growth is biological growth, which takes place when couples in the church have children who then become a part of their parents' church. These children grow up in the church and usually embrace Christ as their Savior as the result of the efforts of their parents and those in the church, such as Sunday school teachers, vacation Bible school workers, and others. Although many drop out of their churches after high school, it's hoped that they'll continue to make the church an important part of their lives throughout the adult years.

The second kind of growth is transfer growth, which takes place as the result of people moving from one church to another. An article in *Christianity Today* indicates that in the early 1990s "more than 80 percent of all the growth taking place in growing churches comes through transfer, not conversion."⁵

Barna observes:

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, to report that our studies of the Protestant churches that are growing the fastest are expanding primarily by incorporating people from other, declining churches. This is growth by transfer, rather than by conversion. Thus, while many churches across the nation receive attention for their explosive growth, relatively few of those churches are attracting adults who are newcomers to the faith. Most frequently, they are simply enlisting individuals who have left their existing church home to be part of the "happening" church. This is such a common behavior that an estimated 90 million adults in America have been "church shopping."⁶

The same appears to have been true in America in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, one study indicates that conservative church growth came as the result of what its authors call "a kind of circulation process, by which evangelicals move from one conservative church to another."⁷

The third way churches grow numerically is through conversion growth. This takes place when the church corporately or through individuals reaches lost people with the gospel of Christ. While most churches are generally aware of whether or not this is taking place, there's an accurate way to determine this. A church can measure its conversion growth by determining how many of those joining the church have been won to Christ through the ministry of the church. Most believe that a conversion rate of 25 percent or higher is necessary if churches are going to make any impact in this world for the Savior.

Of the approximately 15 percent of evangelical churches that are experiencing growth today, much of it is biological or transfer growth. According to the figure cited above from *Christianity Today*, about 80 percent is this kind of growth. While these may be legitimate forms of growth, the Savior had more than this in mind when in Matthew 28:19 he said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." This describes and demands conversion growth.

While a number of evangelical churches aren't very evangelistic, and some schools are weak in the area of evangelism, it's most refreshing to observe that God is sowing American soil with a number of new, biblically based evangelical churches with a Great Commission vision.

Some denominations and organizations have also expressed a fresh interest in evangelism. A new criterion for success is evident in the Evangelical Free Church in America. Recently, they've announced that in the future, their success will be measured more along the lines of obedience to Christ's Great Commission. They desire to see their churches "make disciples"!

Early in the twenty-first century, America will see the starting of a number of new, biblically based, spiritually healthy churches that will measure their success not so much by how well their people know the Scriptures (as important as that is) or how many programs they have but by whether or not they're making disciples. This is not to say that Bible knowledge and programs aren't important, because they are. Bible knowledge is critical and programs are essential in any church. But far too many of our evangelical churches have majored in these areas to the exclusion of Christ's more comprehensive Great Commission mandate.

The Importance of Numerical Growth

The Forms of Biblical Growth

Three forms of growth are detailed in the book of Acts. The first is spiritual growth. This takes place throughout the book of Acts and requires evangelism, sound teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:41-42). The results can be observed in the practices that are mentioned in verses 45-47, such as the common sharing of material possessions with the needy, meeting together for fellowship and meals, and worship.

The second kind of growth is geographical. The key passage is Acts 1:8, where shortly before his ascension the Savior announces, "But you

will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Not only is this a Great Commission text, but it serves to outline the spread of Christianity from the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to Paul's arrival in Rome. It provides a geographical outline of the spread of Christianity as recorded in the book of Acts. This growth begins in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3), spreads throughout Judea and Samaria (8:4–12:25), and then goes to the “ends of the earth”—Rome (13:1–28:31). This implies that the Great Commission had geographical implications.

The third kind of biblical growth is numerical growth. Luke is careful to record the physical growth of various churches (1:13–15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:4, 12; 18:8, 10; 19:26; 21:20).

The first church, located in Jerusalem, was very large because about three thousand people responded to Peter's sermon on Pentecost (2:41). Shortly thereafter, Acts 4:4 records that five thousand men responded, not including women and children. In fact a detailed study of the passages listed above indicates that the churches in Acts were large churches in terms of numbers, not small as many assume.

The Principles of Numerical Growth

All three kinds of growth were vital to the life of the first-century church and each influenced the other. Obviously, all three kinds of growth are still important to the twenty-first-century church and continue to interact with one another. From this we can learn two important principles regarding numerical growth.

Don't Overemphasize or Denigrate Numerical Growth

It's wrong to either overemphasize or denigrate numerical growth. On the one hand, some larger churches place an undue emphasis on their size. They're very proud of their numbers and use them to bolster their self-esteem as well as their pride. In effect, they're playing the “numbers game” in an attempt to proclaim themselves as “spiritual king of the mountain.”

On the other hand, some small churches clearly have a bias against large churches. They argue that the best churches are small churches and tend to see themselves as some kind of spiritual remnant. They can often be overheard saying, “We may not have quantity (lots of people), but we

have quality (spiritual people), and we'd prefer quality over quantity any day!" This leads to the next principle.

Quality Churches Become Quantity Churches

Quality churches don't stay small for very long. It's true that quality churches are spiritual churches. And because they're spiritual churches, they're obedient to the Great Commission and are winning lost people for Christ. The result of this kind of obedience is quantity or numerical growth. This was certainly the case in the early church.

Many small churches don't have quantity because they don't have quality. They're weak in evangelism and will remain small. There are also some big churches that have quantity but are beginning to see some numerical decline because they're starting to lose their quality and aren't as active in winning lost people.

There are also some churches that are exceptions to the rule. They are small churches that serve a particular ministry niche, such as the people in a small rural area or a spiritually resistant group like the Muslims in urban North America or in North Africa. However, the exceptions are rare, and many of our smaller churches need to re-examine their purpose for existence and initiate some kind of evangelistic thrust in their communities.

The Importance of Functions

The third assumption is that the functions of the church (evangelism, worship, and others) are more important than its forms (how it accomplishes these functions). This assumption is best understood by looking at an issue that is faced by every local church and the solution to that issue.

The Issue

The issue concerns whether today's evangelical churches should follow the forms as well as the functions of the New Testament church.

Functions Plus Forms

There are those in the church today who teach that the local church is bound to follow not only the biblical functions or principles of the early church but its forms (methods or patterns) as well. They argue that both the functions of the New Testament church and its forms related to those

functions are obligatory and binding on local churches of all ages. Thus the church is instructed in both what to do and how to do it. They believe that “apostolic precept is apostolic practice” or “God’s work done in God’s way will receive God’s blessing.”

An example would be when the church meets. They would argue that the local church should meet on Sunday because of the significance of the first day of the week and because it was the practice of some apostolic churches (possibly Troas—Acts 20:7) to meet on the first day of every week. Most would argue that other meetings, such as Sunday school classes or a singles’ fellowship, are permitted by Scripture as long as they don’t interfere with the prescribed Sunday meeting of the church.

Functions without the Forms

There are others who believe that the church is bound to follow only the scriptural mandates of the early church but not its practices or patterns, for the latter are cultural and relative. For example, they would argue that when the church meets in terms of the day, time of day, or how long it meets aren’t as important as its actually meeting and what happens when it meets. They would also cite Romans 14:5–12.

The Solution

The latter view is the best solution to this issue. The key here is hermeneutics. The twenty-first-century church is bound to follow the prescriptive passages of the Bible (commands, prohibitions, and so forth), not the descriptive passages (such as those found in Acts 20:7 or 1 Cor. 16:2).⁸ This affects the local church in terms of its liberty and relevance.

The Emphasis Is Liberty

The Scriptures appear to grant Christians a great deal of liberty in terms of *how* they do *what* they do and *when* they do it. While the patterns and practices of the apostolic church may be instructive and helpful, Scripture doesn’t teach that some or all of these patterns are binding on the church throughout the ages.

Certainly, Sunday has significance for the Christian, but the early church met at various times throughout the week in different contexts for different reasons. We find in Acts 2:46 and 5:42 that the Jerusalem church held daily meetings in such places as the temple or various homes. The church at Corinth was instructed to set aside certain funds on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1–2). However, this doesn’t mean that they were bound to have the meeting of the church at this time. Romans 14:5–6 teaches that the

church is free to choose when it meets. Thus we can see that it's very difficult even to determine the practices of the early church (such as when they met), much less to attempt to hold twenty-first-century churches to them. Consequently, each new generation of Christians is free to be innovative and, most important, creative in the forms that the functions take. Indeed, it's likely that the most effective churches in the twenty-first century will have little resemblance to those of the twentieth century and earlier.

The Result Is Relevance

God's intent was probably to instruct us in *what* we're to do, but he also gives us much liberty in *how* and *when* we're to do it. This allows the church to remain relevant to its particular culture, whether it's the first century or the twenty-first century, whether it's located in North America, South America, or the Middle East. Otherwise, it finds itself, much like the Amish, attempting to limit its practices to a particular time and culture, such as the eighteenth century.

Scripture is delightfully refreshing when it comes to the forms (practices and patterns) of local churches. It gives each one the freedom to make itself relevant to its unique culture in terms of what it does. The reason is that it takes different kinds of churches to reach different kinds of people. Thus our churches must constantly evaluate what they're doing in light of the culture and times in which they live. (They are to contextualize the culture, not accommodate or isolate themselves from the culture.) I believe that every pastor and church must develop a biblically based theology of culture that will direct their response to culture.

Whether we realize it or not, each church has its own unique culture. This isn't necessarily bad. Culture, in general, is neutral. (Adam and Eve lived in and with culture before the fall. Also see what Paul says about an item of culture—food—in Rom. 14:14–18.) Culture may be used for good or bad (James 3:9–10). Many older churches reflect the culture that surrounded them some thirty or forty years ago and clearly aren't in touch with the culture around them now. The result is that the unchurched lost in our present culture see this and reject the biblical beliefs of these churches because they sense that they're out of touch with reality and what's taking place in the world. They know a dinosaur when they see one!

The Importance of Excellence in Ministry

The fourth assumption that undergirds this book is that church planters must pursue excellence, not mediocrity, in ministry.

The Problem of Mediocrity

Far too many churches today don't pay enough attention to how well they do what they do. Consequently, they are maintaining ministry mediocrity.

Mediocrity Affects Ministry

This problem applies to various important areas of the church. One example would be the worship service, which is often poorly planned and poorly executed, especially in small churches.

I recall in one such church that a young lady stood up to sing a special song with her guitar. However, she had to stop in the middle of the song to tune her guitar because she had not done so prior to the service. So we all sat and watched and listened as she tuned the guitar. Once this was accomplished, she completed the rest of the song—only it was off key!

Another example of mediocrity is the appearance of the church facilities where much ministry takes place. Many churches seem to forget that if they don't properly and regularly maintain their facilities, they'll deteriorate. It has to do with one of the laws of thermodynamics. As these facilities grow older, the problem becomes more acute. Consequently, leaks develop in the roof, the paint begins to peel, and the sink in one of the bathrooms is hopelessly stopped up.

Mediocrity Affects People

Mediocrity affects two particular groups of people: the members and the visitors. Over a period of time, many church members grow accustomed to the above practices and conditions and don't really notice them anymore. As far as they're concerned, everything is fine. While they don't exactly prefer this situation, many have given in to the fact that "that's just the way it is around here." Others are more aware of the problem. While they've learned to live with the problems, they're constantly aware of them and are too embarrassed to invite any of their friends to church—especially the young people.

Visitors to the church are also affected by mediocrity. In particular, the unchurched lost who live and work in a world that has come to expect nothing short of excellence will notice a lack of excellence. They work in facilities that are well maintained and attend events that are well designed and programmed because the competition in the marketplace is so intense. These are people who are not impressed with and will not respond to mediocrity! Consequently, they attend church one time and never return because they've been convinced through ministry mediocrity that Christianity is second-class. If it's not worthy of the best efforts of

those who profess it, then it's not worthy of further consideration by those who are curious.

If we're ever to reach these people for the Savior, we must begin to recognize the fact that the conditions of our facilities do, in fact, say something about those who worship there. We must also become aware that what we do sends a loud message about the hearts and attitudes of those who perform in such a manner. It's time for a change!

The Solution to Mediocrity

The solution to mediocrity is excellence. God desires that his church excel in its ministries on his behalf. Whatever we do for the Savior must be done well because we do it for him and in his name. Mediocrity and Christianity must never be mentioned in the same breath. The two must never be associated.

Biblical Documentation

But is this biblical? Scripture clearly teaches a theology of excellence. Its principles are found in both the Old and New Testaments.

A theology of excellence is found in the Old Testament. God wanted his people to give only their best when they worshiped him. Thus Moses instructed Israel to bring the best animals as a sacrifice to God (Lev. 22:20–22; Num. 18:29–30). It's important to note that when their hearts began to wander away from the Lord, it was reflected in their worship. Thus, in Malachi 1:8, the prophet warns, “When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty.”

We find the pursuit of excellence in the New Testament as well. In Ephesians 6:5–8 and Colossians 3:23–24, Paul tells us that God expects us to give our best in our work and to do it as if we are working for him. We discover that even at the judgment seat of Christ we'll ultimately be judged according to the “quality” of our works (1 Cor. 3:13). The point is that our God gave his very best when he gave his Son for us. He doesn't expect mediocrity in return.

Need for Clarification

This doesn't mean that God expects Christians to be perfect and that there's no room for failure in any Christian endeavor. The key is to ask why we failed when we fail. If we try our very best but fail because of our less than perfect humanity, this is understandable. For example, if a solo-

ist practices hard all week for a special song yet fails to perform well on Sunday morning, this is understandable. We all have bad days, no matter how hard we work! That's the nature of our humanity. However, it would not be acceptable if she doesn't bother to practice at all during the week and then fails to sing well on Sunday morning. This is ministry mediocrity; this is offering up crippled and diseased animals to God!

Importance of Evaluation

The key to the pursuit of excellence in ministry is constant evaluation. The most effective, relevant churches regularly and intensely evaluate how they "do church." The pastor's sermons are evaluated; the worship service is evaluated. This shows a healthy spiritual concern that Christ be honored in all the church does in his name before a lost but ruthlessly critical world. I'll say more about evaluation and how to accomplish it in the church in chapter 8.

The Importance of Strong Faith

God desires to minister through men and women of strong faith who are willing to trust him for big things.

Jesus Commends Strong Faith

If we were to ask what impressed the Savior when he walked the earth, we'd have to conclude that he was impressed by men and women of strong faith. Jesus constantly commended people for their faith (Matt. 8:10; 15:28) and even healed some according to their faith (9:2, 22, 29). His constant complaint regarding his disciples was their lack of faith. As we read of his ministry to them, the words "you of little faith" constantly ring in our ears (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Mark 9:14-29).

Examples of Faith

Hebrews 11 is instructive in terms of the importance of our faith. Repeatedly, the author encourages us with various cameo appearances of people of great faith. Initially, he warns in verse 6 that "without faith it is impossible to please God." Then he illustrates this point using the lives of Noah and Abraham in verses 7-8.

Noah's great faith is seen in the fact that he believed God to the extent that he was willing to build a huge ark, even though it hadn't ever rained.

We can only imagine what it must have been like trying to explain what he was doing to all of his neighbors!

Abraham's faith is demonstrated in the fact that he was willing to believe God to the extent that he packed his bags and moved his family, even though he had no idea where he was going. We can only imagine what it must have been like to attempt to explain his actions to his friends and family, including those who were believers in the Old Testament sense.

The Lesson of Faith

What church planters can learn from all this is that nothing of any spiritual significance is accomplished outside of faith. It's imperative that church planters be men and women of faith who are willing to trust God for big things in their lives and ministries. What Christ has commissioned his church to accomplish requires tremendous faith, for in Matthew 28:19–20 he has asked us to win the world!

The question we must ask is what can he accomplish through us? Perhaps an even better question is what can't he accomplish through men and women of faith who are willing to trust him to do big things? We've already seen that Paul warns the Ephesian church against asking and thinking too small (Eph. 3:20). Asking and thinking too small is a sign of a small faith. As we, the church of Jesus Christ, minister in the twenty-first century, we need to realize that our esteem and significance are found not in our accomplishments or relationships but in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. And, therefore, we will begin to push ourselves beyond our protective comfort zones to attempt big things for our big God.

The Importance of Courageous Christians

In ministry God uses courageous men and women who are willing to risk failure.

The Problem of Failure

What happens if you fail? What will you do if the church doesn't make it? The answer is we must be willing to fail in order to succeed. Yet far too many people who go into ministry are afraid of failure! They'll not attempt big things for God because they're afraid of what people will think about them if they fail. I'm convinced this was a part of Moses' problem in Exodus 3:11–14.

This is an alarming sign of a deep problem in the area of self-esteem and significance. However, as we understand better the grace of God in our lives through Jesus Christ, we'll learn to value ourselves properly and discover our infinite value in Christ.⁹ Then we'll be able to develop a biblical understanding of failure.

The Solution to Failure

Quite simply, we must not be so afraid of failure. Of all God's prohibitions in the Bible, the Savior's words "fear not" seem to stand out the most.

The Response

The best response to failure is twofold. First, we must realize that risk and failure are inherent in any successful work for God. They go hand in hand. There is not a single successful church today that didn't take risks and experience failure along the way. Often people in ministry are afraid to take risks because they're afraid they may fail. However, not to take risks is to fail!

Second, it's important to realize that obeying God always involves an element of risk. In Acts 15:25–26 Luke notes that the Jerusalem Council sent out with Barnabas and Paul not just any men but "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), the Savior soundly condemns the one who is afraid to take risks and takes from him that which had been entrusted to him. Then he proceeds to honor and reward those who were willing to risk failure.

The Examples

Both the Scriptures and recent history provide numerous examples of people who took risks and endured failure to accomplish great things.

This was true of such biblical personalities as Abraham, Moses, David, and Peter. In Genesis 12 Abraham took a risk. Essentially, he obeyed God and stepped out in faith not knowing where he was going. Moses also took a risk when he defied the pharaoh and led Israel out of Egypt.

The same has been true of more contemporary personalities. For example, Babe Ruth is known in the baseball world for his record-setting number of home runs. The truth is that he struck out 1,330 times but hit 714 home runs in between. It has been reported that he once said, "Never let the fear of striking out keep you from taking a swing at the ball!" Thomas Edison experimented with numerous filaments before he found

the right combination and invented the electric lightbulb. R. H. Macy failed in the retail business several times before he became a success.

The Lesson

We must not glamorize those who take foolish risks or habitually make the same mistakes throughout life. However, risk is not necessarily bad, as long as you know the risks and are willing to assume them. All good leaders, no matter what their profession, learn from their mistakes. The key is that leaders are always learning, and they learn from their mistakes as well as from their successes.

The problem is that just as there are people in ministry who are afraid to fail, so there are churches that don't tolerate failure. If ministers risk making a few mistakes, some established churches will begin to question their leadership credibility. This is another plus for planting churches. The key to starting a church is to create a culture where there's room for failure. According to Robert Metcalfe, chairperson of 3COM, innovation "requires gambling and risk taking. We tell our folks to make at least ten mistakes a day. If they're not making ten mistakes a day, they're not trying hard enough."¹⁰

It's imperative that church planters prepare the soil before they sow the seed. Thus we must know what it is we're doing and why we want to do it. We must also think through how we'll finance the venture and be aware of certain critical assumptions that will affect our ultimate success. Once this is accomplished, the next step is to make sure that God has designed us to start churches. This will involve us in the new and developing area of personal assessment, which the next section of this book discusses.

Turn now to the Church Planter's Workbook and complete the Assumptions Worksheet.