

“A Land of Opportunity: Church Planting in the United States”

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The United States is often described as a land of boundless opportunity, and in many respects this is certainly true. One area of opportunity, however, that seems often to be either denied or simply ignored is the opportunity to plant new churches. Many people believe that America has all the churches it needs and that our entire missionary focus should be overseas. There are many solid reasons for disagreeing with this thinking. Why should we give fresh consideration to the need for planting churches here in the United States?

The most important reason is that the fulfillment of the Great Commission mandate given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ requires church planting. When the Lord said that disciples were to be baptized and taught to observe all of His commands, it presupposes the establishment of local churches in order for this to be carried out. The book of Acts clearly records that the apostles understood this (Acts 2:41-47; 11:19-26; 14:21-23). Paul’s description of his ministry at Corinth makes it clear that he viewed himself as a church planter (1 Cor 3:5-17).¹ Church planting is the true target of the Great Commission, so every church that is committed to the commission must be committed to church planting.

The Apostle Paul makes two statements to the Roman believers that help us understand how he viewed the fulfillment of the Great Commission. In describing his own ministry, he says that “I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation” (Rom 15:20). Paul viewed himself as a pioneer church planter; that is, he went into areas where the gospel had not been preached, and he laid the foundation by planting the local church (cf. 1 Cor 3:10 “like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it”). From the record in Acts, we see that Paul normally focused on significant city centers in order to establish a base from which the Word would spread to the surrounding regions (cf. 1 Thes 1:8).

The second statement by Paul that opens a window into his understanding of the task is found in Romans 15:23, “but now, with no further place for me in these regions.” The regions to which he refers are Macedonia and Achaia (v. 26). How could Paul say there was no more place for him there? Had everyone in those regions trusted Christ? No. Had everyone even heard the gospel? Not likely. What Paul meant was that his work of laying foundations was done; it was now time for the churches that had been planted to finish the task in that region. The churches which had been planted by Paul should now become churches that plant churches. This is exactly what we should expect since the Great Commission includes the words, “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” In other words, the Great Commission has a built-in reproduction principle—those

¹A more detailed examination of this biblical truth is found in the sixth chapter of *For the Sake of His Name* (Allen Park, MI: Student Global Impact, 2002).

who become disciples are obligated to make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey Jesus Christ.

How does this apply to church planting in the United States? It reminds us that having a foundation laid does not mean the job is done. It is certainly true that the foundation has been laid in the U.S. God has blessed us richly with solid, Bible-believing local churches. But in every region of our country there are still communities (and their size and number are growing) that do not have a church like that. It is the responsibility of the existing churches to establish churches that can expand the work of the Great Commission into those communities.

The need is greater than we might imagine. The rate of population growth in our country has far exceeded the growth in churches. In 1900, there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans; by 1996, that number had dropped to 11 churches per 10,000. Over the course of the last century, the American population grew by 300 percent while the number of churches grew by only 50 percent—and that includes *all* churches, not just those that actually believe the gospel of Jesus Christ! The fact is that most of the over 350,000 churches in the U.S. are either doctrinally unsound or dying—some estimate that 3,500-4,000 churches per year cease to exist. Untold numbers beside these are barely hanging on to life and are of little help in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Given the amount of people in this country who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, one could easily argue that the U.S. is the largest mission field in the Western hemisphere and the fifth largest on the planet! Not only is this true because of population growth, but because of the population shifts that are taking place in our nation. These shifts are happening within communities (expanding suburban and exurban areas) as well as regions (the South and Southwest). As these new areas grow, they provide incredible opportunities to plant solid, new churches. The window of opportunity on these areas will only be open for short time, so we can't afford to sleep through it.

Some folks worry that focusing on church planting in the U.S. will distract from overseas missions, but this doesn't make sense. The fact is that we don't really have a choice between these two options; we are obligated to do both. And successful church planting here in the States provides a larger base of sending churches for missionaries to the fields of the world. In fact, given the support struggles that many missionaries face, perhaps we should recognize the long term importance of planting churches that will be missionary minded. It is not "selfish" to plant churches in America; it is potentially selfish to watch the financial base of missions collapse inward while we ease our conscience by sending \$100 a month to 50 different missionaries. Our "missions" ego may be soothed, but we are being very short-sighted about the real, long-term needs of carrying out the Great Commission.

One of the greatest joys of my time here at DBTS has been watching God raise up church planters and missionaries among our students. As I write this, we have recent graduates who are planting (or preparing to plant) churches in California, Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio, Colorado, and Utah. And this is in addition to church planting missionaries in Tanzania, Spain, Brazil, Canada, Cambodia, India, and within restricted access countries which cannot be named. I admire the vision and determination of these men. The world is truly full of places where churches need to be planted, and the United States of America contains many of those places. It truly is a land of opportunity. By God's grace, let's seize it for His glory!

