

ADVANCING THE GOSPEL INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

Part I: Church Multiplying

by Tim Keller

We are entering a globalized, urbanized, and post-secular world. This means that we are going to be more like the Roman Empire than anything seen in centuries.

First, it is a globalized world again. The triumph of Rome's power created the Pax Romana and an unprecedented mobility of people, capital, and ideas. Cities became multi-ethnic and international in unprecedented ways. So today, cities link as much if not more to the rest of the world than they do to their own geographically connected countries. Saskia Sassen in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* makes the case that increasingly the residents of these cities are more like one another than they are like other residents of their own country.

Second, it is therefore an urbanized world again. In the Greco-Roman world during the height of the Roman empire, individual nation-states were weak, and large cities (Rome, Corinth, Ephesus) operated virtually as independent city-states. Cities, not national governments, ruled the world. Today, technology and mobility are again weakening the control nation states have on their own territory. It is becoming impossible to control the flow of information or capital in and out of countries. Multi-national corporations operate out of major cities but do not submit to or serve the interests of any country. Corporate and creative elites, who Pico Iyer calls 'Nowhereians,' live in several cities at once, rather than in any particular country. Everywhere we see the growth both in power and size of major cities.

Third, it is a fragmented, pluralistic world again. For centuries-cultures and nations had much more widespread consensus about basic questions of truth, morality, and the nature of God and ultimate reality. Now, as in the Roman world, there will again be multiple vital religious faith communities and options in every society. We will have traditional, secular, and pagan world-views living side by side. Why? a) Globalization- the mobility mentioned above. b) Disillusionment with the Enlightenment in the West. For nearly 100 years the elites of Europe and North America were fairly uniformly 'secular'-skeptical about any religion or spirituality at all. But the old idea that unaided human reason and science would solve the world's ills and answer the heart's big questions finally is seen as dead end. We are entering a truly 'post-secular,' pagan- pluralistic era much more like Rome. Most interesting is the fact that the number of orthodox Christians in philosophy departments in this country has gone from 0% to nearly 25% in just 30 years. This means that for the first time in 80 years there is 'intellectual space' for Christians to do scholarship, art, and other cultural production. This is big news for center cities like NYC and LA.

No matter what their world was like, Christians have gone back to the book of Acts for centuries to learn ministry practice. But we have now a double reason to do so. Our world has become much more like the world of the Mediterranean world of the 1st century. If we want to see how to spread the gospel in the 21st century-the book of Acts has not been more directly and simply applicable to our situation in 2,000 years. There are two features of ministry strategy in the book of Acts that are crucial in our own world and time. New Testament ministry strategy was- Church-multiplying (Acts 14) and Gospel-centered (Acts 15).

CHURCH-MULTIPLYING - Acts 14: This is the first strategic principle for ministry in the first century-and it is crucial for effectiveness in the 21st century. In the ministry in Acts-church planting is not a traumatic or unnatural event. It is not something odd or once- in-a lifetime. It is not forced on people by circumstances. Church planting is woven into the warp and woof of things, it happens constantly, it happens normally. Paul never evangelizes and discipless without also planting churches. For decades, expositors looked to Acts to find 'the basic elements of ministry'. They always made lists such as these: Bible teaching, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, worship. Yet right there along with everything else is church planting, but it is often ignored. There's a very dubious, tacit 'cessationism' going on here! Implicitly, almost unconsciously, readers said, 'well, but that was for then- we don't do that now". But the principle is-church planting must be natural and constant, not traumatic and episodic.

Text: 14:21-28. Here we see two phases to Paul's ministry. (1) First there is Christian formation. Paul produced new believers. There are two parts to this. (a) Evangelism. v.21- 'they preached the good news'; but it does not use the word for preach, rather a more comprehensive word-they evangelizdomenoi 'gospelized' the city. There's a great deal more to that than simply preaching sermons. The book of Acts shows Paul spreading the gospel through preaching in synagogue services, sharing in small group Bible studies, speaking out in market-places or leading discussions in rented halls, or just talking to people one on one. But the point is-he won a large number of converts. (b) Instruction. v.21b-22. 21a - they went back to converts to "strengthen and encourage". These are two verbs used together in chapters 9, 15, 18, and John Stott calls them an 'almost technical term' for building up new believers. How did they do it? He taught them and re-taught them "the faith" (v.22). This refers to a definite body of beliefs and theology. (2) Second, there is church formation. This also has two parts. David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-culturally* uses the following terms. (a) First, the believers are congregated. All through chapters 14-16 we see new believers not simply go on living their lives as they were but they are led to assemble regularly and are brought into a community. (b) Secondly, the leaders are consecrated. They appointed elders each place. Paul chose elders, a plurality of leaders out of the converts, who now become the ones who teach and shepherd the people in the faith. Though we have to allow plenty of flexibility for different cultures (see below), the unavoidable principle is that he did not keep

them under his direct authority or dependent on him. He made them churches in their own right-not just loose knit 'fellowships.' They had their own leadership, their own structure. When he began meeting with them they were "disciples" (v.22) but when he left them, they were "churches" (v.23). In summary, church multiplication is as natural in the book of Acts as individual convert multiplication.

How were churches started in the book of Acts? There are two basic launching models, as Tim Chester points out in his essay "Church Planting: A Theological Perspective" (in *Multiplying Churches*, edited by Steve Timmis). Basically, church planting was either initiated by pioneer individuals, or by church planting churches. (1) In Paul and his companions, we see pioneer church planting. Though he was sent out by the Antioch church, and he was thus accountable for his doctrine and behavior (Acts 13:1ff.), his work in every city was pioneering work. He did ground-breaking evangelism in each place, without the cooperation or work of other churches. (Note: Thus even 'pioneer' works must be done under some ultimate accountability. Somewhere, the church in some form must lay hands on you and say: we examined your doctrine and life and set you apart for ministry.) (2) The other model is implicit, but there. Churches also plant churches. Where is it in the Bible? It's a simple fact that the churches Paul planted (in fact all Christian churches for 200 yrs) were household churches. Example: Lydia's conversion immediately becomes a bridge to converting her household which then makes her home the first Philippi church. By v.40, they go to Lydia's home to meet the brethren. The same thing happens in Acts 18 with the household of Crispus. What did this mean? It means that the church at Philippi, Corinth, and everywhere else-very naturally could only grow by multiplying new assemblies or house churches. Though Paul writes to the "church" singular "at Corinth", it is obvious by the end of the book that he is addressing a number of household churches-Chloe, Stephanus, etc. The point for us-Tim Chester says, because of the household church basic building block, church planting was built into the church's very nature. You only grow by multiplying new assemblies of Christians who met for edification, evangelism, and praise.

There is a very common objection to reading the book of Acts that way. It goes like this: "That was then! Now, at least in N.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." Here are some answers:

New churches are by far the best way to reach 1) new generations, 2) new residents, and 3) new people groups. Studies show that newer churches attract new groups about 6-10 times better and faster than older churches do. It is because when a church is new, younger and newer people can get in to its leadership faster. It is because when a church is new, it has no tradition and can experiment. It is because when a church is new, its main goal each week is not to satisfy the desires of the long-time members (there are none!) but to reach

new people. As a result new churches are enormously better at reaching new people in a city.

Cities are filled with new generations, immigrants, and residents more than ever. Globalization means new mobile populations coming constantly into cities and if there is not a lot of church planting they will be lost. 2) Pluralization, though, means even what might be called 'native' peoples are no longer homogenous. Different generations and groupings differ vastly from one another. I'm no expert, but from what I have read, the diversity of peoples in each location makes the Anglican parish model pretty obsolete for mission. 3) And lastly, the death of 'Christendom' means now we have something Acts did not have-lots of dead churches, which is just one more reason to plant new churches than what Paul had.

New churches are perhaps the best way to renew older churches and enhance all ministries. Why? (1) New churches are the best single way to re-vitalize older congregations in the area. The new churches help the overall Body of Christ by a) showcasing new ministry forms and ideas that would never have been adopted in older churches, b) creating an 'it can be done' mindset in older churches, c) providing many new converts in the city that find their way to older churches, d) supporting many new ministries that have city-wide benefits. Church planting helps an existing church the best when the new congregation is voluntarily 'birthed' by an older 'mother' congregation. The daughter church brings the mother church into contact with many new groups of people and pioneers new programs that the mother church may have been too traditional to try. Though there is some pain in seeing good friends and some leaders go away to form a new church, the mother church usually experiences a surge of high self-esteem and an influx of new enthusiastic leaders and members. Together the two churches usually see a major increase in numbers, joy, and confidence. (2) New churches are the only ministries that become self-supporting and expand the base for all other ministries. A city needs many ministries- youth work, schools, missions to new groups, and so on. Once they are begun, they need outside funding from Christian givers indefinitely. A new church, however, only requires funding at its beginning. Within a few years, it becomes the source of Christian giving to other ministries, not the object of it. Because it brings in large numbers of unchurched people, church planting is by far the fastest way to grow the number of new givers in the kingdom work in a city.

Application: Basically, there are two ways churches get planted-unnatural and natural. Churches that are forced to do it, and those with a church-planting mindset, which are a natural, normal part of its ministry.

Unnatural Church Planting (two varieties)

Defiant church planting. Some people in the church get frustrated and split away and form a new church-because there is alienation over doctrine, or vision,

or philosophy of ministry. Examples: 1) charismatic splits, 2) cultural splits-2nd generation leaders leave to do a church in opposition to the will of the 1st generation church, and so on.

Reluctant church planting. Circumstances force the church leaders against their will to plant a new church. Examples: 1) They outgrow the building and don't want to move, 2) Some members move to new area and begin to lobby for a church "out here", 3) Some members with a different vision (younger, different worship, etc.) begin to drop out or push for a new service or church. Though leaders may give only begrudging permission or even money and active support, it is still 'unnatural' because church planting won't happen again perhaps ever-unless circumstances again dictate it.

Natural Church Planting. A mindset just like in the book of Acts. That means that church leaders will think of church planting as just one of the things we do along with the rest-we do teaching, evangelism, discipling, worship and music, education, and church planting! Church planting should not be like building a building-one big traumatic hiccup and we are glad that's over with. Rather it is to have the mind set of Paul, who always did a) evangelism, b) discipleship, and c) church planting. This mind-set can be broken down into two extremely important sub-strata. If you can't muster these, you can't have a natural church planting mindset.

First, the ability to give away and to lose control of money, members, and leaders. Hate to use a cliché, but it's true-Paul "empowered" these new leaders. He gave them ownership, and thus he lost a lot of control. This is a huge barrier for churches. They cannot bear thought of money-giving families being lost, or key leaders, or just friends. Ministers are also afraid of giving away glory. If your ministry adds people, you: 1) assimilate them into your church, 2) turn them into Bible studies under your church, 3) spin them into new 'ministries' in your church, it swells your numbers, and you get both control and glory. If you organize them into churches, you are losing money, members, numbers, leaders, and control. But that is just what Paul did. An additional problem-that when you let go, you lose direct control, but you can't really avoid responsibility for problems. It is like being the parent of an adult child. 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. Example: I know of an evangelical congregational church in our area which existed in a small, historic building. They had filled 100 seats twice to max for 4 years in a row. They resisted church planting, fearing loss of money and people. Finally they sent 50 out to a new town to form a new church. Just two years later there were 350 coming to the daughter church. Meanwhile, the mother church filled its seats in about 3 weeks. Now they are kicking themselves-by now they could have planted 3 churches with nearly 1,000 people in the church-family, able to do missions, youth ministry, and many other things together. They realize that they

needed to make the transition from church-planting as hiccup to a church planting mindset.

Second, 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 you. It will develop its own voice and emphases. On the one hand, pains must be taken to be sure that the difference is not too great, or fellowship and cooperation is strained. Remember the book of Acts speaks of "the faith". There is one body of true doctrine at the heart of Christianity. But on the other hand, if you insist that the church be a clone of your own, if you are not willing to admit the reality of contextualization in the Biblical sense of adapting and incarnating-so different generations and cultures will produce a different kind of church-then you won't be able to do church planting!

Example: Paul's adaptations from culture to culture are famous. No-one size fits all for him. And why in Acts 16:13 did Paul 'expect' to find a prayer meeting at the river? Would you? He knew something about God-fearers. Frankly, it takes creativity and wisdom about people to do church planting-and many leaders cannot think 'outside the box'.

Third, the ability to care for the kingdom even more than for your tribe. We see this in the way Paul talks of Apollos, who, though not a disciple of his (Acts 18:24ff.) Paul speaks of him in the warmest terms (1 Cor.3:6; 4:9; 16:12) even though his disciples evidently considered themselves a particular party (1 Cor1:12; 3:4) We see it in the way Paul (as said before) constantly takes his hands off new churches. 16:40-then he left. What we have here is a concern not for his own power or his party's power (and even then, different apostles had their followers and emphases), but for the kingdom as a whole. Test: When we "lose" 2 families to a church that brings in 100 new people who weren't going to any other church, we have a choice! We must ask ourselves: "Are we going to rejoice in the new people that the kingdom has gained through this new church, or are we going to bemoan and resent the two families we lost to it?" 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. Will we resent the 10 people we have lost or rejoice in the 80 people the kingdom has gained?

Conclusion: The church-planting mindset is not so much a matter of trusting new leaders etc. but trusting God. Paul does not give the new churches up to themselves or others. Rather he "committed them to the Lord". Since we live in the Acts world again, it is doubly important to make church multiplication a central ministry strategy.

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The following is the first of a four-part article by Tim Keller, based on his plenary remarks at the 2003 annual meeting of the Mission America Coalition. The Movement will present the first two parts in this issue. To download the rest of the articles go to [Advancing the Gospel in the 21st Century](#)