

Biblical Church Planting

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and
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To our wives, Mandy and Amy.

*Life with you is half as hard,
and twice as good.*

Foreword

You may have heard my story. I went to pastor a dying church on the South End of Louisville, Kentucky. It was brutally difficult. There were three different movements to fire me in my first five years. There were threats of violence against me. The pastoral search team that hired me had left and were slandering my name in the community by my three-year anniversary. At the end of those five years, the church ran out of money, and my body began to suffer over the accumulated stress of those five years. I almost left.

But I stayed God gave grace and perseverance. And in the mysterious providence of God, he began to turn the church the very next year. We began to see conversions to Christ. Biblically qualified leaders started to emerge. We raised up and sent out pastors and missionaries. We became gospel light in the community. And in the most amazing turn of events, many of the adversaries who were against me, God changed their hearts towards me, and they became my advocates. Within ten years, we had seen this dying church revitalized and flourishing.

“So, what was the solution?” Many have asked me that throughout the years. The solution is not a quick fix full of gimmicks and pragmatism—as some would hope. The solution rises and falls on a pastor who is willing to go to these kinds of churches, preach faithfully, shepherd diligently, pray earnestly, lead patiently, and simply stay for a while. In other words, ordinary means of grace ministry.

Ten years ago, I wrote a book about this church revitalization ministry experience. And not just about my experience, but a book

that captured this slow, intentional, faithful, biblical, and ordinary methodology of local church ministry that any faithful pastor called and gifted to this work can do. As a result, *Biblical Church Revitalization* was released in 2016. It has become one of the key resources to represent this type of ministry approach in Baptist circles, similarly to the way Harry Reeder's excellent book, *Embers to a Flame* became a lighthouse for church revitalization work within the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). As a result, for the last ten years I have heard the same persistent question repeatedly: "So, when are you going to write the church planting version of this book?"

This has been a nagging question for my soul for a decade. Church planting is just as important and essential to the building of Christ's church as church revitalization. Despite the many books on church planting, where is the volume that captures the same faithful, biblical, and ordinary approach—one that refuses the latest trend or gimmick and pushes back on the idea that a planter must possess a big personality, unusual gifting, and a star power?

Well, I believe you are holding that book. It took a decade, but I didn't write it. Even better, I found two pastors more equipped for the task. As you read, you will see why. Kyle and Joel have both planted ordinary-means-of-grace churches and bear the scars to prove it. They planted at the height of the personality-driven era and discovered a more biblical and sustainable way. That approach is beautifully captured here. *Biblical Church Planting*, is the companion to my earlier book that I hoped and prayed would one day exist. I couldn't be more pleased. Read on and enjoy. Marvel at God's design for the church revealed in his word. And celebrate how to start and sustain that kind of church through the sufficient means God has given to his people to accomplish it—the ordinary means of grace.

BRIAN CROFT

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Author, *Biblical Church Revitalization*

Introduction

This is a book written by two church planters, who also happen to be friends by virtue of our shared time together in the Doctor of Ministry program at Beeson Divinity School. The churches we helped plant are very different contextually and denominationally. Joel's church is a suburban church in the Deep South. Kyle's is a rural church in the Great Plains. One congregation is a part of a network of churches, the other is a congregation within the Presbyterian Church in America. Outside of a shared mania for college football, you would be hard-pressed to find two congregations situated more diversely.

And yet, for all the differences, the authors of this book share some common convictions related to the work of church planting.

First, the work of the church planter finds its source in the divine work. The church is not our idea. She is the creation of the triune God. You've probably heard the pithy rhetoric that goes something like this, 'What God the Father planned, God the Son purchased, and God the Spirit applied.' Yes, and Amen! There is nothing a church planter can do to create new life in the people God has prepared for Himself. Regeneration is God's work, and His alone. The title of Herman Bavinck's magisterial systematic theology captures the essence of this truth: *The Wonderful Works of God*. If we thought for one second that the weight of planting a church fell entirely upon human shoulders we would give in to despair. We are not sufficient for such work, but, as it turns out, God has a people prepared for Himself from eternity past. In other words, the church is not just an instrument by which God

works in the world. The church is the very reason God created the world. The people of God are an ontological reality.

It should go without saying, then, that the work we are engaged in ought to be done in the way God prescribes. We're not free to play fast and loose, and rebrand the Church of Jesus Christ in the name of a bad model of contextualization, or any other such ill-conceived nonsense. The work of church planting is work God gives to men whom He calls and equips. The one who called you defines the work to which you are called. As we used to say in the powerlifting world, 'Don't be smarter than the program.'¹

With the work of the triune God in building His church as the foundation, we understand the task of church planting to be a four-part movement. There are four parts that must be present as we prayerfully consider this noble calling. There is the minister himself. There is the ministry in which he is engaged. There is the ministry context or mission field. And then there are the mechanics that accompany such labor.

There are wonderful books that consider one of these four aspects. As a primer for church planters, we're putting these four parts together in the prayer that you're getting the full picture of what faithful church planting requires. And, for the record, that's all you can be: faithful. As Paul reminds both the Corinthians and us,

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:5-6).

We commend faithfulness to you. It's the only part of your calling you can control.

1. In the world of powerlifting (in which Kyle used to compete), a lifter preparing for a meet follows a very carefully and intentionally designed training program. Sets, reps, and the weight to be used are all spelled out in a way to get the lifter to peak during the competition—not a week before or after. My training partner Scotty Brant and I used to have to remind one another to simply follow what was designed for us, and not be 'smarter than the program.' Even then, such warnings often went unheeded in our quest to follow the '3 Demandments of Hulkamania.'

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Since we do believe that the work of God precedes and animates our work, we begin with God. In the first chapter, Joel (JB) examines how the church was not God's 'Plan B' in light of our first parent's disastrous decision to disobey their creator. Rather, as JB reminds us, creation exists for the church, a fact further emphasized by the covenant of grace God makes with His people. Jesus drives the nail home with His emphatic statement that the church is the means by which He will build His kingdom. His eternal kingdom. This series of truths ought to put steel in the backbone of even the most timid and discouraged church planter. And, believe us, discouragement is easy to come by when you're a church planter.

That brings us to our four-part harmony: the minister, the ministry, the mission field, and the mechanics. Again, we commend wisdom and faithfulness as the goals here. Keeping in mind that half of all church plants (in the USA) fail, there is plenty of gleaned wisdom from the autopsies of failed church plants. Wisdom requires that we heed well the lessons that someone else provides for us.

Identifying church planters is an inexact science. Are they pastors? Or, are they something entirely different? We're arguing for the following: *every church planter is a pastor, but not every pastor is a church planter*. God is very clear on the character He requires of men who would serve the church (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). There are not two separate sets of character qualifications for pastors and church planters. A planter is a pastor, first and foremost. There are, however, competencies that experience and wisdom have shown to be desirable in a church planter. Undergirding the entire character and competencies conversation is the question of calling. Some traditions do a wonderful job of emphasizing and examining both the internal and external sense of a planter's calling to ministry. Bad understandings of calling are legion, and we will give attention to the received wisdom of God's church in her various expressions in an effort to avoid a bad foundation.

Our convictions regarding the ministry of a planter are unambiguous: *the ordinary means of grace approach is the best way to go about the work of church planting*. Or, as JB memorably states, *God has not only ordained the end, He also ordains the means to that end*. There are certainly other approaches that can be pursued. You may

even see positive numerical indicators accompanying your efforts. But have you planted a church? Are you making disciples? Are your people growing in their love for God and love for others? As we'll argue, the ordinary means of grace is an ancient way of wisdom (and we would argue robustly biblical) approach to church planting.

In Chapter 4, we'll discover that finding the right guy (called, character, competent) who is committed to an ordinary means of grace approach to ministry is not the entire equation. Church planters must learn to think missiologically about the community they're seeking to reach with the gospel. As we already noted, Joel and I planted in very different contexts. It would have been easy to think of our ministry contexts using categories more akin to marketing than missiology. A church planter is seeking to do a specific work in a specific place. That place must be analyzed missiologically, not by market analysis. Let me state this plainly: contextualization is a vital tool for the church planter. To be fair, there are some pretty lousy understandings of contextualization floating around in the church planting world. As we'll argue, contextualization is not trying to make the gospel/cross of Christ palatable or unoffensive to non-Christians. Rather, *contextualization ensures that we're lovingly offending the non-Christians we're trying to reach with the gospel in the right places, and for the right reasons.*

Finally, Chapter 5 brings us to the mechanics. You're starting an organization from scratch. There are forms to be completed and filed. There are bank accounts to be opened. You're inviting people to a thing at a place, so you need to find an affordable place to host the thing. The to-do list can feel overwhelming. In the wise words of our Australian brothers, there is a trellis that must be built so that the vine of the gospel can take root and flourish.² And then, on top of all that, there is a lifetime of ministry ahead of you. The statistics at this point are disheartening and nauseating: 50 per cent of men

2. As part of each chapter, we'll provide a 'For Further Reading' list consisting of a classic work on an aspect of church planting, a contemporary work, and a book from the Practical Shepherding bull pen of resources.

If you're not familiar with Colin Marshall and Tony Payne's splendid *The Trellis and the Vine*, then please allow us to commend that book to you. You'll see a full bibliographical entry on the chapter dealing with Mechanics.

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entering ministry will be out of vocational ministry in 5 years. This depressing number goes to 80 per cent in 10 years. But again, there is wisdom to be heeded on this front as well. We'll give attention to a sustainable ministry and some 'hacks' to help you not just survive, but thrive in the trenches of ministry.

Given the diversity of our denominational backgrounds, there are significant differences related to how we understand the content of what we're prescribing—specifically as we think about ordinary means of grace. Generally speaking, theologians define the ordinary means as,

the means that God has appointed for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace—namely, Word, prayer, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and, necessarily joined to these, the church's discipline and the shepherding of souls.³

To put this in historical context, both the Westminster Confession and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith deal explicitly with the idea:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 88: What are the outward and ordinary means by which Christ communicates to us the benefits of our redemption? Answer: The outward and ordinary means by which Christ communicates to us the benefits of our redemption are His ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Chapter 14, paragraph 1 of the London Baptist Confession reads:

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and The Lord's Supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.

As a Baptist and a Presbyterian, we have differing views on baptism and what's happening in the Lord's Supper. Reformed Baptists

3. Burk Parsons, 'The Ordinary Means of Grace', *Table Talk Magazine*, 3 (June 2020).

have no problem affirming the spiritual presence of Christ in the supper and it not simply being a memorial ordinance (though we are certainly called to remember). Historically, confessional Baptists have shied away from using the term sacrament, using the term ordinance instead.

And yet, for all these differences, we still hold that the ordinary means of grace are the best way to go about the task of church planting.

In the following pages, we're making an argument. *Minister, ministry (ordinary means), mission field, and mechanics must come together to serve the task of faithful church planting.*

Typically, there is an emphasis on one of these areas over the others. While we would argue that the ministry must drive the bus of church planting, an ordinary means of grace approach is not a magic pill to make church planting succeed. If anything, such an approach tends to place more weight—if not emphasis—on the others. If you have an attractional ministry, you don't really need to be that skilled in handling God's Word. You can just have an awesome event to invite people to, and a nice devotional thought from an engaging front man will serve you just fine.

However, if you hold to an ordinary means of grace approach, you must be a skilled handler of God's Word. You must be able to make an argument in your sermon as you divide, explain, and apply God's Word to God's people. You must also have a robust *pastoral* understanding of how your tradition views the Lord's Supper and baptism. This is not the same as being the smartest kid in your seminary class who can demolish those who hold differing views from you based wholly on your awesomeness. We're talking about the ability to sit in the living room of folks in your church and winsomely explain to them why you think baptism and coming to the table aren't just ancient rituals one can take or leave, nor do they automatically convey salvation to those who partake of them. This is the work of a pastor we're talking about, not the verbal sparring of a hot-shot seminary student. You're not trying to prove people wrong; you're trying to demonstrate the rightness of these gifts God has given His people.

What we do vocationally is generally determined by our vocational identity. For example, my (Kyle's) son is currently a firefighter in the United States Air Force. As such, while there are all sorts of really cool

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things an airman can do on an Air Force Base, Airman McClellan's days are spent devoted to the training and tasks necessary to fulfill his vocational calling as a firefighter. Likewise, when I was a defensive line coach for a college football team, we did not waste our time running routes or catching balls out of the JUGS machine. Defensive linemen have no need of perfecting their route running abilities, but their hand placement and ability to read the hands and bellybutton of the offensive lineman across from them are of first importance. What you do is determined by who you are. Or, as Harold Senkbeil states in his marvelously helpful *The Care of Souls*, 'action flows from being: identity defines activity.'⁴

Sadly, too many church planters have adopted vocational identities that are borrowed from other spheres of endeavor. These spheres are not bad—but they do not reflect the language the Bible uses when it speaks of those Christ has given to His church (Eph. 4:7-16). Church planters are not 'sacramental entrepreneurs,' life coaches, public theologians, strategic leaders, or whatever else we might dream up. As we will see, the Bible gives us metaphors upon which we must build our vocational identities. That identity is not just grounded in the work of the planter, but tied to the metaphors the Bible uses as it speaks of the church, which, after all, is what you're actually seeking to plant.

God in His grace does not merely give us vocational identity. He also gives us vocational priorities. We are not free to muck about and choose the path of least resistance, or the approach that will bear the quickest results. 'Nickels and noses' are not the be-all and end-all. 'Multiplication' of impact/gatherings/leaders sounds pious, but it's a facile way to understand the task of church planting. Thankfully, the Bible again gives the means by which we are to fulfill our vocational callings. In the following pages, we endeavor to put some meat on the bone of wrestling with what faithfulness looks like as we pursue our calling via the means God has given us.

This book then is a passionate plea for these two ideas: vocational identity and vocational priority—always with the understanding that

4. Harold Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 17.