

Church Planting and Revitalization: A Campus to Plant Model
Ashland Avenue Baptist Church
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And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:14

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:16-20¹

Introduction

For about 200 years, evangelical Christians have referred to Matthew 28:16-20 as the Great Commission (along with Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46-49, and Acts 1:8). The Great Commission texts have been an animating force calling Christian churches to personal evangelism and cross-cultural missions.

The pioneer of the modern missionary movement, William Carey, wrote,

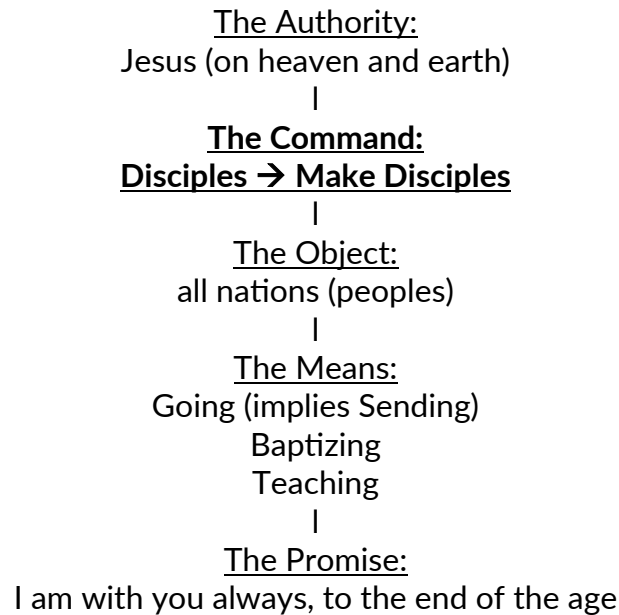
Our Lord Jesus Christ, a little before his departure, commissioned his apostles to "Go," and "teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19); or, as another evangelist expresses it, "Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). This commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves into every country to the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants, without exception, or limitation. They accordingly went forth in obedience to the command, and the power of God evidently wrought with them.²

The Great Commission command was Jesus' final post-resurrection message to his followers. It was intended to serve as a dominating principle by which every aspect of church life should be understood. What is often ignored is that obedience to Jesus' Great Commission mandate demands not only individual evangelism but also church planting.

The essential command is plural; it is for disciples to make disciples. The command is to a people, not an individual. In the immediate context, the group is the fellowship of Apostles, and by extension, it applies to the churches, built on the apostolic foundation (Eph. 2:20).³ The direct object in the biblical text of the command to "make disciples" is the phrase "of all nations." In other words, the scope of the Great Commission has no

boundaries. It includes all peoples in all places, without exception. There are also three participles that define what obedience to the Great Commission looks like: going, baptizing, and teaching. All support the command with action.

Consider the following conceptualization of Matthew 28:16-20:



The means outlined in the Great Commission demand churches, and obedience to the command demands churches who plant churches. There is more going on here than individual evangelism, not less, but certainly more.

The Great Commission Demands Church Planting

Understanding the command leads to the inescapable conclusion that the Great Commission is a command to churches and that command to be obeyed demands the planting of churches. Without churches planting churches, the Great Commission is not being fully obeyed.

The Acts 1:8 Promise, Spirit-Empowered Church Planting

In Acts, we read about all that Jesus continued to do and teach by the power of the Holy Spirit through His people. Acts 1:8 promises, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Once again, we see the expansive scope of the Great Gospel Commission but notice that when we see God fulfilling His promise, the result is the planting and building up of churches.

In response to Peter’s gospel preaching, “those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” to the church (Acts 2:41).

We find going, baptizing. Then we see, “they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). Going, baptizing, teaching, and the result is a church planted.

Paul, A Sent-Out Missionary Church-Planter

Reading through Acts, you find that ongoing gospel proclamation continues to birth, not just individual Christians but multiplying churches (Acts 9:31). One of the churches birthed was the church in Antioch. It was a Jewish-Gentile congregation birthed through lay Christian gospel proclamation (Acts 11:20-21). The church in Antioch became a powerful gospel catalyst when the congregation sent Paul out to be a missionary church planter (Acts 13:1-3). Through the efforts of their missionary church planter Paul, the church at Antioch planted churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus, and almost certainly others. In Romans 15:23, Paul can say after his first three missionary journeys, “I no longer have any room for work in these regions.” It seems that Paul's expectation after churches were planted in an area was that those churches would continue that work of reaching others and planting new churches.

Mark Keown explains,

Paul was not merely concerned with personal individual salvation, although it is important to him. A key feature of his mission strategy was the establishment of churches in each town in which he ministered... W. P. Bowers has rightly emphasized that the formation of churches was at the center of Paul's mission purposes... Paul's desire is to plant churches. In a sense, then, the churches Paul planted are the goal of his mission. They were to be self-replicating, carrying on the mission in their towns and regions, inviting people into the church, and forming new ones... For Paul, the very existence of the church is missional.⁴

For Paul and the New Testament churches, church planting was a normal part of faithful obedience to the authoritative Christ who gave the Great Commission and empowered his church to live it out by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In other words, church planting from a biblical perspective is not to be seen as the isolated activity of a few churches who are into that kind of thing. Instead, all who faithfully follow Christ in his churches are to be people who proclaim the gospel to make disciples and plant churches.

The Danger of Forgetting Who We Are

Could it be that so many churches in the United States of America exist but are weak and withering because they have forgotten not merely what they are to do but who they are as a Great Commission people? We must never forget that the Bible ends with a gathered community of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

The reality of how the Bible ends should shape our focus and strategic efforts here and now. The fact that Messiah's Kingdom, in one sense, has already come and, in another sense, will be consummated in the gathering of the eschatological (end times) community should color all our thinking and planning. The church is the eschatological community of the Kingdom, and local churches are outposts of Christ's Kingdom. Thus, being a church planting people expresses His Lordship, who we are in Christ, and where we are headed as His people.

The famed English Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon told his congregation,

We encourage our members to leave us to found other Churches; nay, we seek to persuade them to do it. We ask them to scatter throughout the land, to become the goodly seed which God shall bless. *I believe that so long as we do this, we shall prosper.* I have marked other Churches that have adopted the other way, and they have not succeeded.⁵

Our testimony at Ashland Avenue Baptist Church is the more we have given to plant churches, people, effort, and resources, the more we have prospered. We had a scriptural burden to plant churches but the approach we have embraced was shaped by God's providence. Below is a bit of that story.

A Campus-to-Plant Model of Church Planting/Revitalization

When I first arrived at Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, the congregation had gone through a challenging time, and the last thing on their mind was church planting because they were in survival mode. Nevertheless, my biblical conviction is that all churches should pray and labor to plant churches in obedience to the Great Commission. The first time I met with the whole congregation when I went in view of a call, I told them if they called me as their pastor, our growth would lead to tipping points where we would begin to plant churches aggressively.

By God's grace, the congregation grew, and as leaders, we started exploring options related to church planting. We looked at various locations, checked out the demographics, considered whether there was a real need in particular areas, and prayerfully considered many options. As we went through this process, I received a phone call from a colleague I taught with at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, an interim pastor in Richmond, Kentucky. He told me how long he had been interim and that he had suggested to the congregation that they needed a partner church that was healthy and strong to help them move forward on their gospel mission. He also recommended that they contact our congregation.

When they called us and we met with them, our staff devised a strategy for revitalizing their congregation, which was down to a few dozen people. After listening to them tell the story of who they had been as a church and where they were at that point, we decided that half-measures would not be the most helpful to them. They needed a clean

break from everything they had been doing and reorientation towards clarity of mission, strategic gospel priorities, and ecclesiological clarity.

Our commitment was to plant churches and God providentially brought an opportunity to do so that was not what we expected (like most times) that forced us to think new thoughts about church revitalization or planting (or replanting).

Adoption

Our proposal to them was that our congregation would adopt them. We used the language of adoption because we wanted them to understand that we would be bringing them fully into our church family. They needed to know that they would become members of Ashland Avenue Baptist Church with a shepherding pastor on site, and from that point forward, it would not be us and them, Lexington and Richmond. It would simply be us. One church that, for a time, would meet at two locations.

We also found the adoption language helpful because it communicated that we were bringing them into our church family and our goal was to lead, love, and nurture them to one day send them back out. Our goal was not to keep them but to launch them once again as a fully autonomous local congregation. Our ecclesiological convictions do not accommodate the idea of a multi-site church permanently. Still, we believed it could be a strategic tool in church revitalization and planting.

Just like in the adoption of a child, we would assume all their assets and liabilities and bring them into our family to love, care for, cultivate, and one day launch back out into the world as an autonomous local church. Our parameters for launching them back out as an autonomous local church were *sustainability* but also *reproducibility*. We want to cultivate our new church members meeting at a different location in such a way that they did not merely think about surviving but thriving for the sake of the spread of the gospel and the Kingdom of Christ. So, ultimately, they needed to be a people who would see their responsibility to become a church that plants churches.

Learning a New Family

A child who is adopted doesn't lose the reality of where they are from and the life they have known. Absolutely not, that is a vital part of their story and who they are. But they do add a new family and gain a new story. Understanding this way of thinking is essential for the congregation being adopted. It is not a loss but rather a gain. There was a reason that they needed to be adopted; they recognized that, and now they must learn how to be a productive and effective member of their new family.

Of course, if you have ever adopted a child or walked with somebody who has adopted a child, you know that the transition is never an easy process. There are many difficulties and many painful moments. Still, it is a commitment (at first legal and formal, that

becomes relational) to one another and to love that ultimately develops a new way of thinking and a transformative bond.

For the reality of what has changed to be signified and understood, our campus pastor shuts down almost everything the congregation has been doing ministry-wise and, through a process of prayer and teaching, attempts to reorient everyone's thinking about all the aspects of congregational life. All of this is being done with a focus toward a formal launch service for the adopted campus. After the launch service, the new campus of Ashland Avenue Baptist Church gets busy doing gospel life together with greater simplicity but greater intensity in focus. In other words, we commit to doing less and doing what we do with greater clarity and excellence.

Creating Transformative Gospel Culture

It is essential to transform how people think about what they are doing. Most often, struggling congregations think the problem is with the programming, the events, or the topics. In other words, most struggling congregations think there is an external fix to the fact that they are withering and dying, but that is rarely reality. Two churches can have the same programming, events, and topics but completely different attitudes toward them and their responsiveness or lack thereof. What must be communicated is that what is vital is how we think about all the things that we do and that our thinking is biblically informed and cruciform (cross-shaped).

Saying that every congregation must learn that everything a church does must ultimately be about Jesus and his gospel may sound obvious. Still, it most often is not, and maintaining that kind of gospel-dominated culture is a matter of spiritual battle. Thus, Paul says to the crisis-ridden church at Corinth:

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.
1 Corinthians 2:2

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ
2 Corinthians 10:5

Paul believes that the core problem of the church amid all of the surface problems that had emerged is that Christ, while not being forsaken, has been decentered in the life of the congregation. Christ must be the center and goal of every aspect of a church's ministry.

Tim Keller observes,

Over time, all churches, no matter how sound their theology, tend to lose sight of the uniqueness of the gospel and fall into practices that conform more to other religions or to irreligion. Their doctrinal instruction loses sight of how each

doctrine plays a role in the gospel message, and their moral instruction is not grounded in and motivated by the finished work and grace of Christ. The leaders of the church must always be bringing the gospel to bear on people's minds and hearts so that they see it as not just a set of beliefs but as a power that changes us profoundly and continually. Without this kind of application of the gospel, mere teaching, preaching, baptizing, and catechizing are not sufficient.⁶

Building biblical gospel culture means that all preaching, teaching, and ministry must be animated by the gospel with a call to the obedience of faith. The Scripture is not an inspired book of moralisms or a book of virtues; it is, from cover to cover, a book about the glory of God in Jesus Christ through the redemption of his people who will dwell in the kingdom of Christ forever. People who obey moral imperatives simply to avoid punishment or to gain prestige and a name for themselves are both animated by self-centered motivations, fear, and pride. These are forms of self-justification, that is, substitute gospels. While their actions may benefit the culture at large, and for that, we can be thankful, no Christian community ought to settle for gospel-less motivations. Only Jesus and his gospel create a community where self-sacrifice makes sense.

I am attempting to clarify the fact that creating a transformative gospel culture is less formulaic and more simply doing ministry life together, focused on the right priorities and thinking about the right realities while also giving ourselves over to them.

Churches can struggle and die because they've abandoned biblical orthodoxy, but we must also be reminded that they can struggle and die because they embrace a dead orthodoxy. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones described dead orthodoxy as one who can rightly cite all the doctrines and biblical positions. Still, they are marked by a general attitude of "smug contentment" rooted in "self-satisfaction." He explains,

And that is the condition of being 'at ease in Zion'—you remember that expression in the book of the prophet Amos chapter 6 verse 1? This is the description, it seems to me, of people who are anxious to have sufficient religion to make them feel safe, but who require nothing beyond that. They are out for safety and they want some kind of security. There is always, after all, that great fact of death in the distance, and what lies beyond. And there are many people who become interested in religion for this reason only. They are not interested in the thing itself, they have no real positive desire after God, but they have got this very definite negative interest in safety. These are the people whom we may describe as being interested in religion only as a kind of parachute. You never know when it may be needed, accidents may take place. So it is very good to have this mechanism at hand. Ah, but you must not spend the whole of your life thinking about it. You must not be too serious, you must not be too concerned about this, though it is good to have it. So while you give the main part of your life, and your interest to things that belong to this world, you just make this provision in case of need just enough religion to make you feel safe, but no more than that.⁷

The goal of congregational revitalization and congregational life itself is that a local church would be a community where the truth is not only made clear, but it is also made real in people's lives.⁸

Sustainable AND Reproducible

As mentioned earlier, sustainability and reproducibility are the markers for releasing the campus as an autonomous local church. Sustainability is more than survivability. Sustainability implies the ability to be replenished and maintained for a prolonged time at a certain healthy level. For a congregation to be sustainable, it must be healthy. There are plenty of churches with a lot of money that are unhealthy, and there are plenty of churches with a great deal of activity going on that are unhealthy. Health in the life of a congregation can be seen in many ways. Here are a few examples:

- Christ-centered preaching and teaching ministry.
- Unprogrammed gospel witness (though there is nothing wrong with programming and training).
- Commitment to the priority of prayer as essential.
- Fellowship and sense of real genuine community among its leaders and small groups.
- Self-sacrificial commitments.
- Non-programmed ministry to one another and others that springs up without the leadership suggesting or overseeing it.
- Delight in serving without being recognized or praised.
- Humility is counting others as more significant than self.
- Serving people not in your affinity or age group in the church.
- Understanding that it is Christ's church and not my church.
- Longing to send people out to the mission field, in ministry, and to plant churches.

The key culminating mark of sustainability in our campus-to-plant model is reproducibility. Since we believe that biblically faithful churches who obey the Great Commission plant churches, the key mark of being released as an autonomous congregation is a commitment to and an ability to plant churches. There is no way to quantify when a campus should be released because many factors must be evaluated, and some of those factors defy the ability to quantify concretely. In our experience, we do not rush the process, but when the time comes, it has become clear to the campus pastor, congregation, and other leaders that the time has come.

Conclusion

A local church willing to step in and adopt another congregation, making it a campus, is involved in self-sacrificial ministry. That congregation commits to advancing the Kingdom beyond their immediate concerns and priorities. A struggling and dying congregation willing to be adopted participates in an act of humility and submission. It's

hard for a congregation, even a struggling one, to admit it needs help and to commit to changes that upset what they have known as normal. But self-sacrifice, humility, and submission are qualities the gospel calls us to and ways we make much of Christ in our individual and corporate lives as His followers.

A campus-to-plant model is not the only way to obey the Great Commission in church planting and revitalization; it is one God has blessed in our church community. When I look around and see how many existing churches are unhealthy, struggling, and barely staving off extinction, I think it is a model more churches should consider.

We have hope for this work of church planting and revitalization because we have God's all-sufficient Word. There is a sense in which the campus pastor is simply unleashing the Christ-centered Word afresh on a congregation and believing the Spirit will own it for the fame of Christ. I love the way Edmund Clowney celebrates the Word's power in the life of the church:

In every task of the church, the ministry of the Word of God is central. It is the Word that calls us to worship, addresses us in worship, teaches us how to worship and enables us to praise God and to encourage one another. By the Word we are given life and nurtured to maturity in Christ: the Word is the sword of the Spirit to correct us and the bread of the Spirit to feed us. In the mission of the church, it is the Word of God that calls the nations to the Lord: in the teaching of the Word we make disciples of the nations. The growth of the church is the growth of the Word (Acts 6:7, 12:24, 19:20): where there is a famine of the Word, no expertise in business administration or group dynamics will build Christ's church.⁹

In 2 Corinthians 11:28, Paul writes about the challenges he faces, "Apart from these external things, there is the responsibility that weighs on me every day, *my anxious concern for all our congregations*" (New English Bible). I believe this campus-to-plant model reflects the kind of large-hearted voluntary connectionalism and burden for one another we find in the Apostolic witness. In the New Testament, we find examples of churches communicating with one another, being concerned for one another, praying for one another, sharing resources, encouraging one another, and cooperating. Paul writes in such a way that he assumes that churches will be concerned and willing to help other churches (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

May it be so in our local churches as well.

¹ Underlying the Great Commission text is Daniel's great vision of the Son of Man's universal lordship: "To [the Son of Man] was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, *that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him*" (Daniel 7:14, see Matt 28:18 in the first half of Daniel's sentence, and 28:19 in the second half).

² William Carey, ["The Missions Manifesto,"](#) *Christian History Magazine-Issue 36: William Carey: 19th C. Missionary to India* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1992).

³ Ephesians 2:20: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

⁴ Mark J. Keown, ["Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Pauline Letters,"](#) vol. II (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 483–493. (See, W. P. Bowers, "Church and Mission in Paul," *JSNT* 44 (1991): 89–111.)

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, ["The Waterer Watered,"](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 11 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865), 238.

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 54.

⁷ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, ["Revival"](#) (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1987), 69–70.

⁸ The distinction between making the truth clear and making it real is one I picked up from Tim Keller. For example: "**Preach not only to make the truth clear but also to make it real.** We have seen how Paul seeks greater generosity from people by appealing to them to know the grace and generosity of Christ (2 Cor 8). In other words, if Christians are materialistic, it is not merely a failure of will. Their lack of generosity comes because they have not truly understood how Jesus became poor for them, how in him we have all true riches and treasures. They may have a superficial intellectual grasp of Jesus' spiritual wealth, but they do not truly, deeply grasp it. Preaching, then, must not simply tell people what to do. It must re-present Christ in such a way that he captures the heart and imagination more than material things. This takes not just intellectual argumentation but the presentation of the beauty of Christ." [Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 77.]

⁹ Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 16.⁹