Chapter 8

Why Church Planting in Europe?
On Authorizing a Common Evangelical Practice[α]

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1. Evangelicals and Church Planting

The language of church planting (*plantatio ecclesiae*) has a venerable pedigree, and is theoretically accepted by virtually all Christian traditions. Traditionally, the concept of church planting referred to the formation of the Christian Church in lands where Christianity had not yet taken root, and where there were no churches available. Thus, 'church planting' was a term exclusively used in pioneer situations. It still has this meaning in Roman Catholic reflection on mission, as transpires from Vatican documents such as *Ad Gentes* (1965) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990). However, as a consequence of the fragmentation of European Christendom after the Reformation the concept of church planting was increasingly transferred to the level of local congregations. Even if it made less sense for a fractured Christianity to talk about the one and only Church that had to be 'planted' in the 'mission fields', it was perfectly possible to use church planting terminology for the multiplication of local churches (congregations). Under the influence of Evangelical societies and faith missions this became the standard use of the expression 'church planting' in the modern missionary movement. Moreover, as many Protestants, and Evangelicals in particular, did not recognize that so-called 'Christian' lands were fully evangelized, this church planting could happen both inside and outside 'Christian' territories. Thus, genuine missionary motivations and denominational expansion often interacted, provoking 19th century critics like Gustav Warneck to accuse Evangelicals of 'denominational patriotism'.[1] Especially in Europe, Warneck's critique has been repeated time and again by representatives of national churches who are confronted with Evangelical church planting in what they consider as their own parochial turf.[2]

In this contribution I will address this particular issue of Evangelical church planting in Northwestern Europe. I focus on this area because Europe is immensely diverse, also in terms of

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[1] Warneck, *Evangelische Missionslehre*, III:9.

[2] For Eastern Europe, cf. e.g., Sergei V. Nikolaev, 'The Orthodox Challenge to Methodism in Russia', in: William J. Abraham, James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2009, 469; Alexandr Negrov, Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, 'Baptism as a Symbol of Sectarianism in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia', in: Sharyl Corrado, Toivo Pilli (eds.), *Eastern European Baptist History: New Perspectives*, Prague 2007, 133. For some reflections on contemporary "moral panic" with regard to church planting in Germany, see John D. Boy, 'The Spatial Practices of Deterritorialized Religion: Church Planting in the German Urban Public', unpublished conference paper (courtesy of the author). Boy shows how modern German press coverage of evangelical church planting uses a "logic of guilt by association" by linking it to the religious right in the United States, fundamentalism, theocracy, and religious fanatism. His fieldwork makes clear how deeply unfounded such claims are, at least with respect to recent evangelical church planting in the German big cities. Clearly, this type of description has become a literary 'trope' or a cultural 'frame' that can be traced back to the 19th century, or perhaps even earlier.

religion. My question is, plain and simple, what does authorize the multiplication of churches in areas where there are many churches already, according to Evangelical missionary authors? By and large, Evangelical authors have always used two types of argumentation to defend this: biblical arguments and pragmatic arguments. A typical Evangelical book on church planting sets out with a collection of Bible texts, showing that the apostles planted churches, and it continues with (usually a much larger) section which presents all kinds of data showing that church planting is good for church growth, contextualization, leadership development, etcetera. Only more recently a third line of argumentation, based on a wider theological analysis, has emerged. I will argue that the use of biblical arguments by Evangelical church planting advocates is not very convincing, that pragmatic argumentation – even if true – is not sufficient to fully authorize church planting in areas where there are many churches already, and finally that the more recently developed theological arguments appear to be the most promising grounds for a defence of church planting in Europe.

2. Biblical Arguments

2.1. Terminology

In Evangelical legitimizing discourse the Bible, and especially the New Testament, is the prime authority. Therefore it is no surprise that in Evangelical missionary literature it is widely affirmed that church planting is biblical. It may come as a surprise, though, that the actual phrase 'church planting' does not occur in the New Testament. This absence may be more logical, however, than appears at first sight. After all, the most natural interpretation of the phrase 'church planting' is to take 'church' as the object of 'planting'. In other words, the use of this phrase assumes that we have a recognizable concept of 'church' in the first place. There must be something about 'church' that precedes the planting process, something universal and transcultural that can be identified, and subsequently 'planted' or 'transplanted' in new areas. This may explain why we find references in the New Testament to the 'word of the gospel' or the 'kingdom of God' being 'sown' or 'planted', but not to 'church' planting.

Take for example 1 Corinthians 3:5-7, which counts as a classical proof-text for any biblical defence of church planting. This passage definitely introduces the language of 'planting' in the context of Christian community formation. On a closer look, however, the text does not support the claim that the Bible speaks about *church* planting. The most natural explanation of this passage seems to be that Paul sees himself and Apollos as those who have planted and watered the seed of the gospel, while the whole process of growth is the mysterious work of God.[3] The intended object of 'planting' and 'watering' is likely the gospel about "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2) rather than the church.[4] It is this apostolic message that is sown and cultivated, expecting God to bring it to maturity in the lives of the new disciples. This way of speaking is on a par with the imagery used by Jesus in many of his parables, for example when he speaks about the "sowing" of the gospel or of the kingdom of heaven (e.g., Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, 31-32).

From this it does not follow, however, that the term 'church planting' lacks all biblical authorization. If the whole process of coming to faith and discipleship can be compared with sowing or planting seeds, its result (a new Christian community) can logically be described as a garden or a plantation. This happens in some New Testament texts, continuing an Old Testament tradition of identifying the people of God as his vineyard (e.g., Matthew 21:33-46; cf. Isaiah 5:1-7). Building on the same tradition, the apostle Paul claims the right to be nourished by his churches as follows: "Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes?" (1 Corinthians 9:7). Also he believed that the

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[3] Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2006, 63: "Paul and Apollos represent episodes of planting and watering (aorist active tense or aspect); God continuously gives the increase (imperfect tense), while ministers come and go".

[4] Cf. L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary*, Peeters: Louvain 2003, 207: for Paul "the preaching of the gospel, the proclamation of the Christ event, was *the* central activity".

conversion of the gentiles was like the "grafting" of wild branches in the "olive tree" of Israel (Romans 11:17). Therefore, although 'church' is never the object of 'planting' and 'sowing' activity in the Bible, it can be described as a 'plant' or a 'field'. In this way, there seems to be some biblical underwriting for the term 'church planting', especially when we take 'church' as the *result* of 'planting' rather than its object. The latter option will only work if the word 'church' represents a more or less universal phenomenon that can be identified in distinction from the planting process itself. Although the beginnings of such a systematic reflection on the nature of the church can be traced in the New Testament, the actual definition of the Church as something universal and transcultural, something which can become the object of the 'planting' act, is not found before the second century.[5]

2.2. Church Planting in the New Testament
It goes without saying that the apostles planted churches where there were no Christian communities yet.[6] However, this apostolic practice in pioneer territories cannot be transplanted without further argument to areas where there have been churches for centuries already. If one decides to plant churches in Germany or Denmark, one needs further contextual argumentation explaining why it is necessary to extend the age of church planting into infinity. There is no *direct* New Testament material that can help us here, since this has been written in a completely different situation.

In evangelical church planting literature this plain historical observation is often obscured, because of the tendency to identify evangelism with church planting. This happens, for example, when the apostolic practice of gospel proclamation is defined without reserve as a church planting strategy.[7] However, the apostolic practice of evangelism was concentrated on the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ. It was a *message*, and not a *strategy*. The apostles believed that the world *had* changed by the coming of the Christ; they did not believe that they were the ones that had to change the world by their strategies. I am not disputing the fact that church planting was a natural element of their missionary practice, but that is not the same as saying that church planting was their 'strategy', or that witnessing is the same as harvesting. This would amount to confusing the nature of an activity with its results. It is important to maintain the right order: gospel proclamation as the 'strategy', and church formation as the desired and expected result of this proclamation.

Blurring the distinction between evangelism and church planting has as its consequence that church planting is elevated to the same level as gospel proclamation. From this it is only a minor step to rendering church planting into a timeless mandate that directly results from obeying the Great Commission.[8] Thus, leading church planting theorist Ed Stetzer writes: "The first believers heard the

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[5] As far as I know, Irenaeus of Lyons was the first to use 'church' as the object of 'planting'.

[6] A good and critical discussion of arguments for church planting based on the New Testament can be found in Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*, Paternoster: Carlisle 1998, 64-72. For an expanded sketch of Paul's missionary practice in relation to pioneer church planting, see Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*, SCM: London 2012, 3-27.

[7] E.g., Martin Robinson, David Spriggs, *Church Planting: The Training Manual*, Lynx Communications: Oxford 1995, 9. Other examples in James H. Feeney, *The Team Method of Church Planting: A Practical and Biblical Manual for Church Planting as a Viable Method of Evangelism*, Abbott Loop Christian Center: Anchorage 1988, 5. More sober is George W. Peters in *A Theology of Church Growth*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids 1981, 20: "The apostles seemingly did not go out to 'plant' churches. They were not commissioned to launch out toward that goal. They were sent forth to preach the gospel. Yet, wherever Acts 1:8 was faithfully discharged, a church was born".

[8] Some authors would even claim that Jesus was a church planter, and that his whole ministry revolved around church planting. This would imply that to follow Jesus Christ would mean to become a church planter. In terms of evangelical authority discourse, such a claim pushes its logic to the very climax. See e.g. Dietrich Schindler, *The Jesus Model: Planting Churches the Jesus Way*, Piquant: Carlisle 2013 (translated from German); Idem, 'How to Create a Jesus Movement of Multiplying Churches', in: Evert van de Poll, Joanne Appleton (eds.), *Church Planting in Europe: Connecting to Society, Learning from Experience*, Wipf&Stock: Eugene 2015, 42-61.

Great Commission, left their homes, and went out to plant. When we hear the Great Commission, we should also be motivated to go out and plant new congregations".[9] To be clear, he writes this about the United States, not about some unevangelized area! Of course, if evangelism is identical with church planting and if evangelism is a duty for Christians in all places and times, Stetzer is perfectly right. However, if these two aspects of mission must be distinguished, as they clearly must, there is simply no reason to conclude from the Great Commission that every act of evangelism assumes church planting without regard for time and place. I agree with many church planting advocates that the Great Commission's stress on baptism and discipleship implies a relationship between gospel proclamation and enfolding converts into a church.[10] Yet, again this must be carefully contextualized in an area where there are many churches already. It certainly goes to far to say that the Great Commission entails church planting inside and outside 'pioneer' territory. In short, it is perfectly biblical to say that evangelism is a perennial duty for Christians, and that this includes the gathering of converts in faith communities, while denying that this must always lead to the establishment of *new* churches.

As many of these writers are Americans, this distortion of the New Testament material shows how deeply entrenched the practice of church planting is in the culture of North America. Apparently it is so self-evident that many church planting advocates do not even see a problem here, and almost innocently project it into the New Testament. However, we may quote texts endlessly, but even if they would prove that the apostles had a church planting *strategy*, this in itself would not be enough to advocate church planting as an evangelistic strategy in 21st century France, Canada or Australia. All these arguments presume a necessary and unbreakable connection between evangelism and church planting, while ignoring the gap between New Testament pioneer practice and our post-Christendom mission in 'old' territory. As soon as this difference is recognized, church planting cannot be defended solely on the basis of evangelistic practice. We need to decide anew in every context whether evangelism should involve church planting or rather should lead to inviting converts into existing churches.

The supposedly biblical mandate of church planting is also defended on the basis of some idiosyncratic arguments of a more or less exegetical nature. For example, many reflective practitioners ground a plea for 'organic' reproduction on a presumed design for growth implanted in creation. "All healthy living things grow and eventually reproduce themselves".[11] This "divinely established principle" is subsequently applied to churches: "Apple seeds beget apple trees; sheep beget sheep (…) By the same token, *churches reproduce churches*![12]

The problem with this argument in most church planting literature is that it amounts to little more than metaphor-juggling. Obviously, the church is *not* a biological organism such as an apple tree. Of course, the Bible does use organic metaphors for the church in order to highlight several dimensions of what it means to be God's people, but it also uses other imagery of a more 'technical' or 'institutional' kind. Inspiring metaphors are immensely important to understand the church, but they tend to become deceptive when they are considered in isolation, separated from reflective theology. As Avery Dulles dryly remarks, to call the church "the flock of Christ" does not mean that Christians grow wool.[13] The problem with metaphors in isolation is that they can be bent in any direction. For example, Jesus did not have any children in his life on earth, even if he was more alive than any living being. Would this not mean that his Body on earth must also refuse to reproduce itself?

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[9] Ed Stedzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That's Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture*, B&H: Nashville 2006, 41.

[10] See, for example, Craig Ott, Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication*, Baker Academic: Grand Rapids 2011, 22-23.

[11] Roger N. McNamara, Ken Davis, *The Y-B-H (Yes, But How?) Handbook of Church Planting: A Practical Guide to Church Planting*, Xulon Press: n.p. 2005, 35.

[12] Feeney, *Team Method*, 1.

[13] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: Expanded Edition*, Doubleday: New York 2002, 14-15.

Anyway, even if a case can be made that the church naturally reproduces itself in the service of God's mission,[14] this does not mean that each and every local congregation must reproduce, or that church planting is a biblical mandate in every context. After all, there are plenty places in Europe where the church seems to have been extremely successful in terms of reproduction – to the extent of creating new concerns. Again, one needs additional argumentation of a contextual and hermeneutical nature to justify new church formation in areas where there are many churches already.

Another biblical argument for church planting in (over-)churched areas is derived from the meaning of the word 'nation', as it has been used in Matthew 28:19 and Romans 16:25-26 (*panta ta ethne* – all nations). Donald McGavran has made a plausible case that this word does not refer to modern nation-states such as India or Norway. Jesus and Paul "had in mind families of mankind – tongues, tribes, castes and lineages of men".[15] Although it remains difficult to define exactly what is meant by the term 'people group', that is so popular among Church Growth writers, it seems a wise advice that "church planters need to think less about political boundaries and more about the populations who live there".[16] After centuries of Christendom it is easy to think in terms of 'Christianized' nations where enough churches are available. But evangelization or Christianization does no longer happen from above, by political arrangements. Kings do no longer determine the religion of their subjects. No matter how many churches are present within the borders of a certain nation, it is perfectly possible in late-modern and fast-changing societies to have groups (ethnically or socially) that are without meaningful contact with those churches whatsoever. One can think of recent immigrants, certain language groups, subcultures, lifestyles, or even age groups. The ends of the earth have come to our doorstep.

Church planting's prime motivation, Anglican church planter Bob Hopkins says, is "to express the gospel in and for groups and neighbourhoods which are not being reached". It "multiplies the models of church life available, in response to the mosaic of cultural, social and ethnic diversity in our nation".[17] Within the context of Western societies this amounts to a new motive for church planting, based on the recognition of deep pluralism. The rapid pluralisation in these societies during the last decades requires a greater diversity of churches (*and* new ways to express unity). Thus, under specific circumstances obeying the Great Commission might involve church planting within the borders of nations where many churches are available already. The existing churches may be too much of one kind, or they may be unevenly distributed over the country. Also, parish churches may decide to adopt a multi-congregational model to maximize the number of worshipers.[18]

Although this may be a contextual argument for church planting in areas with many churches, there is something problematic about its uncritical acceptance of societal pluralism as a point of departure for church formation. Donald McGavran's theologically suspect 'homogeneous unit principle' seems to be highly influential here.[19] This critique, in my opinion, renders this argument for church planting rather vulnerable. I doubt whether it can serve as sufficient justification for church planting in areas with many churches. However, the following three considerations may help to redeem this argument at least to some extent.

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[14] Cf. Charles van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church: An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory*, Rodopi: Amsterdam 1981; George William Lings, *The Church's Calling and Capacity to Reproduce*, PhD Thesis University of Manchester, 2008.

[15] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth: Fully Revised*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1980, 56.

[16] Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 39.

[17] Bob Hopkins, Tim Anderson (eds.), *Planting New Churches*, Eagle: Guildford 1992, 14.

[18] Cf. Gary Jenkins, *Multiplying Churches*, Grove Books: Ridley Hall 2008.

[19] Cf. Martyn Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs? A Critique of Fresh Expressions', in: Louise Nelstrop, Martyn Percy (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, Canterbury Press: London 2008, 38: "More generally on the subject of ecclesiology, there seems to be little in the fresh expressions movement that has evolved beyond the cultivation of the kind of (bourgeois?) niche groups that could potentially be advocated through Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle".

First, it is easy to underestimate how extremely pluralistic our societies have become. In most of the major cities of the West it is perfectly normal to find more than a hundred different ethnicities. There is no local church, old or young, that can serve all these groups at the same time, through one programme. Only the issue of worship language would exclude many people already, however unintended. And there are many other decisions to make, all with great cultural impact, such as style of music, structure of leadership, type of building, and so on. Here, the best may easily become the enemy of the good, meaning that the ideal of ethnic, generational, and cultural reconciliation may become an ideological obstacle for the formation of real, imperfect Christian communities. In such conditions, churches should look for models that do at least some justice to the mission of the Kingdom in a context of deep pluralism. Multi-congregational churches, multi-site churches, and multi-ethnic churches may indeed be the best witnesses to the Kingdom here.

Secondly, those who emphasize parish ministry over against 'networking' ministry, arguing that the latter type is far more susceptible for creating segregated churches, must not forget that in a segregated society the difference between parish and network may become blurred. There are large neighbourhoods, and even complete towns, which are composed of very similar people. Thus, focusing on a certain territory and being open towards all the people who live there may result in a very homogeneous church after all. At least, that is the experience of many inner city churches, attracting mainly young career people, or of churches in suburbia that are filled with white middle class families. Such churches may do their best to attempt cultural and social reconciliation, but this will probably not result in a very mixed crowd on Sunday mornings.

Thirdly, it must be noted that young congregations are almost always quite homogeneous, because their initial outreach takes usually place among the friends, relatives, and colleagues of the first group of participants. Finding a middle course between becoming exclusive on the one hand and trying to please each and everyone on the other seems the only possible way ahead. Elsewhere I have worked out that in our pluralistic societies a 'target group' may be a point of entry in the complex socio-cultural tapestry of a given context: you start with a specific group, and from there you work towards wider social networks. The big challenge is to hold up the ideal of gospel reconciliation in such a context, by gradually broadening the community, becoming more inclusive and diverse in the long run. What is inevitable in *starting* a church becomes a sin when it is embedded in *being* a church. This is the paradox in which church planters have to work.[20]

In short, the Great Commission's mentioning of "all nations" may be the basis for thoughtful hermeneutical reflection on our changed societies, offering a rationale for new Christian community formation in some places. Whether this must be called 'church' planting depends, in my opinion, on the development of a more diverse group composition, reconciling individuals and communities who are segregated in the wider world.

After this overview of the biblical material we may conclude that neither in apostolic practice nor in New Testament ecclesiology is there a direct argument for church planting in Northwestern Europe. Additional contextual reasoning is always required to bridge the gap between (New Testament) pioneer planting and new church formation in areas where one inevitably builds on someone else's foundation. Such a contextual argument may be found in the rapid pluralisation of the nations of former Christendom. In a post-Christendom culture, Jesus' mentioning of "all nations" as the address of the gospel message can no longer be viewed through the self-evident historical experience of monocultural, monolinguistic, and monoethnic nation states, containing largely immobile populations. Increasingly, our explanations of the Great Commission must take into account that we live in an age where the ends of the earth lie around the corner. As a consequence, there are large groups of people without any meaningful connection with the churches in their

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[20] Stefan Paas, 'Ecclesiology in Context: Urban Church Planting in the Netherlands', in: C. van der Kooi et al. (eds.), *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, VU University Press: Amsterdam 2012, 137. Cf. Julie C. Ma, Wonsuk Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/Charismatic Missiology*, Regnum: Oxford 2010, 118: "[The] homogeneity principle is applied only in the beginning and, to be a true biblical church, this 'utilitarian' principle must be overcome as soon as possible".

geographical neighbourhood. Sometimes these people may be enfolded in existing churches, but often this will appear impossible. This may be a good reason to form new Christian communities that, given the right conditions, may grow into churches.

3. Pragmatic Arguments

Evangelicalism was born in the Age of Enlightenment, and it has always attached great value to arguments based on experience and rational argument. Its empiricist character reveals itself in the large sections devoted to pragmatic argumentation in church planting handbooks.[21] It is not always clear how this argumentation relates to biblical arguments. Usually, biblical and pragmatic arguments are juxtaposed without much hermeneutical clarification. For example, one handbook introduces its pragmatic section as follows: "The biblical imperative is reason enough for obedient believers to engage in church planting. However, there are other compelling reasons for investing our lives and resources in the task of founding new churches".[22] This may represent the common opinion among Evangelicals with regard to church planting: God commands us to do so, but when we do it, we will find out that it works. Thus, while biblical arguments are sufficient *authorization* for church planting, the pragmatic arguments help us to see the *rationality* of the biblical mandate for all times and places. Biblical and pragmatic argumentation for church planting may relate to each other like arguments against extra-marital sex. While having sex outside marriage is considered as a sin by many Evangelicals, on the ground of Bible exegesis, they usually present a wealth of other, pragmatic arguments that count as evidence for the wisdom of having sex only within the life-long faithful relationship of marriage. The underlying hermeneutical assumption seems to be that God's commandments can also be explained from a perspective of goal-rationality. Rather than being true *because* they work, God's mandates *demonstrate* their truth in practical life.

However, while this position must be distinguished from pure pragmatism in theory (truth is independent from success), it may easily slide into something very much like pragmatism – sometimes ironically so. Ed Stetzer, for example, states that church planters must not be focused on "trendy techniques", but rather on solid theology. He explains: "[B]oth statistically and anecdotally, I've found that a church which correctly applies the concept of true discipleship will accomplish both goals: growth and depth. In fact, studies show that the higher the standards of biblical teaching, the longer people remain engaged".[23] Here Stetzer seems to be giving a pragmatic argument for not being pragmatic!

Be that as it may, Evangelical writers provide a wide range of pragmatic arguments for the multiplication of congregations. On a closer look, however, the large majority of these arguments relate in one way or another to (numerical) growth.[24] Church planting is supposed to further the growth of the church by a set of interrelated reasons, such as:

- extending the range of options for people who are religiously interested;
- increasing the quality of churches' supply because of competition;
- creating access to unreached people groups and new immigrants;
- keeping up with demographic shifts and growth;

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[21] Pragmatic arguments are arguments that are based on an analysis of the perceived succes of a certain strategy or action. In other words, they are utilitarian in nature, while biblical arguments have a more deontological (duty-like) character.

[22] McNamara, Davis, *The Y-B-H Handbook*, 43.

[23] Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 24.

[24] See, for example, the lists in Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters*, Abingdon Press: Nashville 1991, 13-36; Ralph Moore, *Starting a New Church: The Church Planter's Guide to Success*, Regal: Ventura 2002, 21-29.

- having lower thresholds for newcomers because of the more flexible character of young churches.

In fact, the belief that church planting is one of the most reliable strategies for church growth has gained the status of Evangelical doctrine in some circles. For example, the 1992 Derbyshire Declaration issued by the International Baptist Conference stated: "We believe that a powerful means for growth is at the disposal of the Christian Church, and a most effective means to fulfil the Great Commission is the establishing of new congregations". The most famous expression of this belief may be this claim by church growth theorist Peter Wagner: "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches".[25] On this view, churches are planted not because a number of people *have* been reached, but to reach them in the first place. Church planting is considered as a proven 'method', 'strategy' or 'means' to numerical church growth.

The theological problem with this is the instrumentalization of the church. Those who believe that church planting is a methodology for church growth, usually explain that this will only happen when churches adapt to the requirements of growth. They must accept simpler structures, more efficient leadership roles, accessible liturgies, and so on. The result is that ecclesiology is adapted to the good that is desired. Even if it would be established beyond doubt that church planting is a secure way to church growth,[26] this would raise other questions such as "Is it allowed to undress the church so much in the service of evangelism (or anything else)"? After all, simplifying the doctrine of God by rendering Trinitarian faith into a more radical monotheism might make evangelism in Muslim countries considerably more successful. Lowering the bar for discipleship might increase the number of converts more than anything else. However, most Christians would find such measures irresponsible; clearly the end does not justify the means. Thus, even if the goal would be undisputed, achieving it is not a good justification so long as it remains unclear what exactly must be sacrificed to achieve this success. Therefore, this argument can only carry the weight of the defence if there is at least no good objection *against* church planting in today's Europe. Reversely, the argument would gain considerable strength if it would be supported by additional *positive* theological arguments.

As we have seen, there is no straightforward biblical evidence for church planting in areas where there are many churches already. It will simply not do to apply the New Testament practice of pioneer mission on a continent where pastors and priests have worked for more than a thousand years. This does not necessarily mean that church planting in (Northwestern) Europe is unbiblical, but given the shallowness of exegetical reasoning in much church planting literature, and the uncomfortably utilitarian character of the growth argument, there is not much that speaks in favour of church planting in these nations. That is, unless we can find other arguments. To these we now turn.

4. Church Planting as a Theo-Logical Consequence

Even if church planting is not in itself a duty in every time or place, it may be an implication of our commitment to other duties. For example, a commitment to truthful speaking about God may have the development of theological education as its logical consequence. Or, to mention an even stronger example: deep reflection on the nature of God, the work and person of Jesus, and the activity of the Spirit, has led to the doctrine of the Trinity. Neither theological education nor the doctrine of the Trinity is *directly* supported by the Bible, but Christians of all times have accepted that they are unavoidable once we have accepted central biblical claims.

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[25] C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, Regal: Ventura 1990, 11.

[26] In fact, it is not, at least not unequivocally (see chapter 3 of Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West*). For a brief introduction, see Stefan Paas, 'Church Planting and Church Growth: Causally Connected?', http://eurochurch.net/articles/church-planting-church-growth-causally-connected.php>.

In this way another type of justification for church planting outside pioneer areas can be developed. There are two categories in this line of defence. The oldest category consists of justifications for church planting based on commitment to theological orthodoxy. In other words, church planting may be a necessary consequence of the pursuit of purity. The second defence of church planting by implication is much more influential today, and it is theologically more promising. Here church planting is defended as something that follows from the deep relationship between 'church' and 'mission'. The largest part of this section will be devoted to this discussion.

4.1. Confessional Arguments

A rather painful reason for church planting in countries that are saturated with churches is the 'sectarian' or 'confessional' motive. It states that the existing churches in a certain area have failed to obey the gospel and have wandered away from the task of evangelizing their nations. Therefore, new churches are needed that are up to the task. This practice of confessional church planting in the ancient Christian nations of Europe emerged after the Reformation, and has resulted in the creation of a small 'free' or 'independent' church sector in many nations. Although this argument sounds unsympathetic in ecumenically sensitive ears, and although a lot of very judgmental, sheep-stealing, sectarian church planting is going on, the argument in itself cannot be discarded out of hand – at least not by Protestants. After all, Protestants, from whatever denomination, cannot deny that their own ecclesiastical existence originated in such a decision – or, rather in a series of these decisions.

It is possible that churches disobey the Great Commission, lose their convictions, or accept heresies.[27] The fact that some Evangelical denominations decide far too soon that this is the case, does not alter the principle. If a stalemate is reached between two parties, and by lack of a bishop, the way out is usually the planting of a new church. Also, if upon thorough research it must be concluded that the churches in a given area have become unfaithful in their missionary calling, and are unwilling to change, this may make the planting of a new church inevitable. There may be some justification for some splits for some time. We should be very tolerant towards anything we do not understand immediately, we should certainly persist in reforming a church that is suffering from problems, but in the end the time may come that we feel called (or forced) to start a new congregation.

Having said this, I believe that this reason to plant a church is increasingly becoming obsolete in the most secular parts of Europe. In these regions many 'mainline' churches are moving on a path towards more missionary consciousness. Recently, for instance, Pope Francis asserted that "missionary outreach *is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity*".[28] Currently, even the large 'mainline' Protestant churches of Europe have embarked on church planting as a response to the increasing plurality of their societies. Most 'free' or 'independent' churches are certainly not doing a better job in terms of mission here than many older churches.[29] Theological liberalism has become the property of an ageing minority. Moreover, so-called 'nominal Christianity' is less of a problem here than in countries where every citizen is considered a baptized church member. Counter-Christendom rhetoric and revivalist expectations, that have been drivers of new church formation for a long time, are wearing out.[30] In short, while this particular reason to plant a church can never be ruled out in principle – at least not by Protestants, its credibility depends largely on the presence of a de facto religious monopoly in society. Such monopolies are increasingly crumbling away in many European nations.

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[27] Cf. Murray, *Church Planting*, 37; Ott, Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 36-38.

[28] Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii* (2013), 15. Emphasis in the original. The document contains important remarks about the necessary reformation of the (Roman Catholic) Church, including the papacy, in order to restructure it for mission (e.g., sections 26-33).

[29] More on this in chapter 3 of my *Church Planting in the Secular West*.

[30] Of course, this may be different in areas where a form of Christendom or 'ethno-religion' is still functioning. I am well aware that Europe is hugely diverse. What I am writing here is much more applicable to Northwestern Europe than to other parts of Europe.

4.2. Missiological and Ecclesiological Arguments

Other arguments point at the relationship between 'mission' and 'church', and draw conclusions from this. For reasons mentioned below it is no coincidence that most of these contributions are written by Europeans.[31] They were the first to experience that the 20th century Evangelical obsession with numerical growth and reproduction is not always very helpful in a more secular setting.

One of the most fundamental issues in Christian mission is the question whether God's mission is concerned with improving the world in which we live, or with building a new or alternative world. Of course, these two goals do not necessarily bite each other, but for the sake of clarification it is helpful to set them against each other for a moment. If the message of the gospel aims at improving the world, this means that everything Christians do must eventually be justified by its effectiveness in world improvement. God is working his mission in and through the dynamics of the world, transforming it in the direction of his kingdom. As far as the church plays a part in this, its role is to witness to this work, and support it wherever it can. This perspective on God's mission has influenced the so-called ecumenical movement to a large extent. Currently, it is also influencing late modern Evangelicals who stress the 'incarnational' character of mission, and dispense with everything 'attractional' in the church. On this view, the role of the church is very limited; at best it is an instrument of God's mission in the arena of social justice, ecological concern, and political action. A suspicion against church planting follows suit. Church planting sends a wrong message; it suggests that the church rather than the world is central in God's mission. By drawing people within its community the church emphasizes the gaps within humanity, and it distracts people from the real task of transforming the world into a place of justice and peace.

As I have worked out more elaborately elsewhere,[32] to follow this track to its logical consequence would mean that Christians lose their own voice. If there is no separate Christian identity, no specific Christian cultural analysis, no real social and cultural basis for a Christian vocabulary and worldview, all that is left is this world and its pursuit of what it considers just and truthful. Christians are part of this society of mankind, but with no knowledge or experience of another society. What would be the basis for a particular Christian approach of the world, if the world is all there is? After all, what do Christians know that social activists or green activists do not know?

If this analysis is correct, there is no way to avoid the conclusion that God's mission implies the church – a different social reality that is part of this world yet does not belong to this world. Of course, the gospel message has to play a role in the restoration of creation, in the healing of wounds, in the reparation of the effects of sin. There is a this-worldly dimension in mission. However, using this specific Christian vocabulary ('creation', 'sin', etc.) cannot be derived from merely observing the world. It cannot be learnt from reading newspapers or watching news channels. These concepts witness to a new world, an alternative society, with a different language. Therefore, there is no way to separate 'mission' from 'church'.[33]

What does this mean for church planting in areas with many churches? In what follows, I will present four reflections on the relationship between mission and the church, and work out some of their implications for church planting.

First, we might reconsider the relationship between evangelism and church formation. I have said above that evangelism and church planting are separate moments in the process of mission. They must not be collapsed, at least not on the ground of sloppy exegesis. However, through another, theologically more responsible route one could ask whether evangelism does not normally

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[31] Ott, Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 19+fn. 1, state that "theological reflection on and rationale for church planting has often been rather shallow", but that this situation is beginning to change due to the efforts of mainly British writers.

[32] *Church Planting in the Secular West*, chapter 4.

[33] This has, of course, repeatedly been asserted in the various statements by the Lausanne Movement. See, for example, the original Lausanne Covenant (1974), and the Manilla Statement (1989).

presuppose the existence of a Christian community. Let us remember that neither Jesus nor the apostles used to go to people alone.[34] Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs (Luke 10). Paul used to travel together with companions.[35] The idea of the solo evangelist, so deeply rooted in our modern Western history, is not an image that we find very often in the New Testament. Through a community people will hear a message that is much more complete (or 'incarnate') than just a verbal address. The life of the community, together with (spontaneous) verbal invitations, will move them into a decision for or against Christ. This practice remembers us of the famous dictum by Lesslie Newbigin, that the congregation is the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'.[36]

This is especially important in a late-modern, post-Christian Western society where people think they know what Christianity is all about. Many writers, reflecting on Christian mission in the West, echo Newbigin's classical phrase. "Our Bible is open to public examination", says Jim Wallis, "so is the church's life. (…) The gulf between them has created an enormous credibility gap". According to him, "[t]he power of evangelism today is tested by the question, What do we have to explain to the world about the way we live?".[37] If young people in Western societies think that the church is obsolete, this can only be challenged, says John Douglas Hall, "when the (…) distance between church and world, faith and life, gospel and context is in some real measure overcome, or, speaking positively, only where the church lives unprotectedly in the midst of the world, where faith is a dialogue with life (not only an internal dialogue of the community of faith itself), where the gospel engages and is engaged by context".[38]

All this may lead to the decision that evangelism must not be conducted by a 'talking head' but by a community sent out to witness to Jesus Christ by its words and its life together.[39] If the church is the 'creation of the Word' (*creatura Verbi*), as the ancient dictum says, the creation of the church may begin where the first intention to proclaim the gospel is born. Of course, this does not mean that each and every act of evangelism includes church planting. But the communal character of evangelism introduces the question of the church right from the outset. It may be possible for the evangelists to return to the sending church together with the 'harvest' that God has given. However, the development of a new church may be a natural result of such an apostolic adventure, especially when new, uncharted contexts have been opened for the gospel.[40]

This leads us to a second, narrowly related, reflection on the relationship between evangelism and community. In a traditionally Christian society evangelism was often done with the expectation that converts would join existing churches. However, if evangelization and ecclesiality are connected, we must not be surprised that a new Christian community is often the organic result of evangelism. In fact, this is exactly what usually happens in practice as our societies grow more secular, and the gap between older churches and new people groups increases. During the last decades many churches have found out that the classic approach of evangelism, rooted in the revivalist heritage, did not work anymore. This 'call-them-back' tactic simply assumed too much knowledge and belief. Evangelism 2.0 entailed a more extended period of initiation, usually through a course. The Alpha Course was introduced in the 1990s, and many others followed, such as Christianity Explored and Emmaus. But already early in this millennium it was recognized that

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[34] Of course, there are some exceptions, as in John 4:1-26 and Acts 8:26-40.

[35] On Paul's use of teams, see Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 12-16.

[36] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1989, 227.

[37] Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but Never Private*, Harper: New York 1981, 2005 (revised ed.), 21. Similarly, Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, SPCK: London 2002.

[38] Douglas John Hall, *The Cross In Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2003, 177.

[39] For a more elaborate and very insightful discussion, see Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 135-150.

[40] Or course, there are several models to put this into practice. One particularly popular today is the so-called 'mission-shaped community' or 'mid-sized community'. See Mark Stibbe, Andrew Williams, *Breakout: One Church's Amazing Story of Growth Through Mission-Shaped Communities*, Authentic: Milton Keynes 2008. Cf. Tim Chester, Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community*, Inter-Varsity Press: Nottingham 2007; Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 144.

something went wrong. Although many people went through these courses, only very few found their way to the local churches. Usually, they preferred to remain in the group where they started.[41] The most natural consequence of successful evangelism, it seems, is the formation of a *new* community. Thus, bringing the Word of God to new groups of people may carry the seeds of a new church with it.

My third reflection on the relationship between mission and church pertains to church growth and church size. When churches attract new members they tend to accept without further consideration that they will grow bigger. However, by an increase of size the internal dynamics of church life will change. In most social contexts this process will begin already when communities have more than 50 members. Relationships will be stretched, because many members will not know each other. This will make it more difficult to maintain naturally New Testament directions for church life, such as mutual love, comfort, correction, forgiveness, and so forth. Leadership will become more distant, formal and bureaucratic. It will be more difficult to apply church discipline in a loving, personal atmosphere. Large churches tend to be run by a relatively small percentage of their members, thus turning the majority into more or less passive consumers. New Testament scholar James Dunn writes:

> Modern denominations tend to think of any congregation less than 100 as failing, and to despair over chapels with membership less than 20. But the congregations in the beginning of Christianity were mostly as small, and even when the whole church in a city like Corinth could assemble in one house, they can only have been about 40 strong. (…) Where *we* think of congregations as too small, perhaps the real danger is that they are too *large*![42]

Of course, there are advantages to size, such as the possibility to offer more programs, while small churches are more susceptible to sectarianism and suffocating relationships. But, as advocates of house churches never become tired to tell us, small churches are generally able to reflect the communal life of the New Testament church much more naturally. It is remarkable that theological questions are seldom asked when churches *grow*, but that they abound when churches *reproduce*. Would it not be a wiser course to split the church when it grows, and create two smaller human-scale communities instead of one large congregation? Without turning this into a new law, I believe that there is good theological 'circumstantial evidence' to advocate church planting as a strategy for growing churches.

Fourthly, there may be no better way to discover the missionary nature of the church than by going through the process of church planting. Can the Christian church deny itself such lessons, even in a context where there are many older churches already? "Church planting", say Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, "is where missiology and ecclesiology intersect".[43] Church planting can be an opportunity for churches to think through their identity as a people called for mission.[44] When a denomination commits itself to church planting it is constantly forced to consider profound

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[41] I have reflected on this more extensively in *De werkers van het laatste uur: De inwijding van nieuwkomers in het christelijk geloof en de christelijke gemeente*, Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer 2003. For similar observations with regard to newcomers to Catholicism in France, see David E. Bjork, 'The Future of Christianity in Western Europe: The End of a World', *Missiology* 34.3 (2006), 316: "converts", having experienced a "rupture with the past" usually do not mix in easily with "believers", i.e. those who are Christians mainly through socialization (which make up the large majority of parish churches). The life of the small group where they were initially received and initiated has become very important for them, and accordingly they find it very difficult to find their way in 'ordinary' parish life. Interestingly, after their baptism they make use of the variety of small group ministry in the Catholic Church (such as Focolari or charismatic prayer groups), which usually exist outside or alongside the parish. And it seems that they find their nurture there, rather than during Mass.

[42] James D.G. Dunn, 'Is there evidence for fresh expressions of church in the New Testament?', in: Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions: Defining issues for today's Church*, Church House Publishing: London 2008, 62.

[43] Ott, Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 26.

[44] Murray, *Church Planting*, 48-53. Cf. Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 120-134.

questions of ecclesiology, mission, and contextualization. This is especially important on 'old' ground, since, according to Tim Chester the church tends to accommodate to a culture when it has settled there long enough.

> Through mission the church is able to break free from external conformity to culture and internal conformity to tradition and rediscover the vitality of the gospel. Church planting is vital for the health of the wider church. Good church planting forces us to re-ask questions about the gospel and church.[45]

Of course, one can contest this by saying that this church does not need to do church planting to recover its true identity as a church that is sent by God in the world. Designing a more inclusive worship service or opening a shelter for the homeless might have the same effect. It might, but to my experience church planting calls us out of our comfort zone more than anything else. If the Western church takes seriously the discovery of its missionary nature, as has happened in the 20th century, would this not lead to a constant pursuit of living precariously in the world? The pursuit of continuous reformation requires flexibility on the part of the church, expressing itself in a search for new contexts, new generations, new cultures who need the gospel. In one way or another this flexibility must affect its very structures.

All this does not mean that church planting is the only way to explore the relationship between mission and the church. What I hope that these four reflections have shown is that church planting can be a theologically responsible option in Europe, even in those parts where there are many churches already. Evangelism, especially when it stretches out toward groups that are far removed from local churches, will often naturally result in a new church. Church growth may result in church multiplication. And a Christianity that denies itself the experience of church planting may have only an abstract notion of what it means to be called to mission. To be clear, I do not withdraw anything that I have said to temper church planting 'idolatry'. Church planting is not a panacea for growth, and confessional church planting in the most secularized parts of Europe is often nothing but a mask for denominational expansion. Christian community formation that is theologically responsible will strive for visible unity with (other) churches, as far as possible, and it will take ecclesiology seriously enough to create room for the development of ecclesiality. In this way probably less churches will be planted, but hopefully they will be far more complete in their witness to God's Kingdom.

5. Conclusion

Legitimation of church planting in Northwestern Europe depends on a string of arguments. When considered separately they may not be sufficient to authorize this practice, but together they make a good case for its theological legitimacy. We have seen that the least promising approach is a Biblicist appeal to an alleged divine commandment to plant churches regardless of time and place. This approach fails because it does not recognize the hermeneutical distance between the New Testament pioneer practice and the current European context. The second legitimation discourse contains a rich variety of utilitarian arguments, centred by and large on the issue of numerical growth. Interesting and necessary as they are in themselves, these arguments cannot carry the burden of authorization alone, since they are prone to reducing ecclesiology (and theology in general) to an instrument for the higher purpose of growth. However, in combination with other arguments of a more theological nature pragmatic argumentation can play a role. I have argued that such arguments exist, and I have presented a few. All this means, in my opinion, that the contemporary missiological discussion in the Evangelical sector of the Church, has developed an

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[45] Tim Chester, 'Church Planting: A Theological Perspective', in: Stephen Timmis (ed.), *Multiplying Churches: Reaching Today's Communities Through Church Planting*, Christian Focus Publications: Geanies House 2000, 26.

increasingly richer and more interesting discourse of legitimation for church planting in so-called 'Christian' lands. If current attempts of national churches in England, the Netherlands, and Germany to embark on church planting in their own nations succeed, they will all benefit from the experience-based writing that has been done by Evangelical reflective practitioners throughout the 20th century.