

# The Importance of Church Planting to the Great Commission

By Lloyd Walter Grant, PhD<sup>1</sup>

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus communicated many powerful messages. Some of those were long discourses, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Kingdom parables, or the Olivet Discourse.<sup>2</sup> Others were brief, compact expressions that are quickly memorized. Two examples would be Matthew 16:18, where Jesus stated, “I will build My church,” and Matthew 28:18-20, the passage commonly referred to as the Great Commission. Jesus placed considerable value on the importance of the church and the Great Commission's imperative to make disciples. Those two memorable statements are essential themes in the other twenty-six books that make up the New Testament.

The church's theme can be found throughout the letters of the Apostle Paul. He broadly wrote about matters about the church in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, collectively known as the Pastoral Epistles.<sup>3</sup> He also addressed the subject of the church through word pictures such as God's household in Ephesians 2 and the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. Perhaps the most dramatic statement Paul made about the church is found in Ephesians 3:10, where he said that the manifold wisdom of God is made known through the church to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.<sup>4</sup>

The theme of the Great Commission is found throughout the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> It is expressed in the opening verses of Acts 1, particularly Acts 1:8.<sup>6</sup> The Apostle Paul made a strong plea for the first portion of the Great Commission process, inviting unbelievers to enter into a relationship with Jesus, in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. In Colossians 1:28, Paul described his ministry in a manner that could easily be interpreted as a restatement of the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Walter Grant, *Theological Analysis of Church Planter Profiles*, A PhD Dissertation presented to the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Many scholars hold that Jesus delivered five major discourses in the Gospel of Matthew: The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-7:29); Mission and Martyrdom (Matt 10:5-11:1); The Parables of the Kingdom (Matt 13:1-53); Life under Kingdom Authority (Matt 18:1-19:2); and, The Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:1-25:46). These discourses help to structure the book; cf. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible*

<sup>3</sup> Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway suggested that “the pastoral letters – 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus – are letters written to church planting team members left behind in Ephesus and Crete”. Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway, “Church Planting: From Antioch to Acts 29 and Beyond,” *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* (Spring 2010): 94.

<sup>4</sup> In commenting on Eph 3:10, John Stott observed, “As the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops.” The story of history unfolds before an audience of heavenly beings. Stott suggested, “We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation.” John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 123-24.

<sup>5</sup> The Great Commission, commonly understood as recorded in Matt 28:18-20, can be defined as making disciples. Making disciples is a process that begins by inviting unbelievers into a relationship with the Lord Jesus, which would be signified by baptism. The process continues by guiding these new followers of the Lord Jesus in being transformed into the image of Christ, which requires teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded. A more precise understanding of the theme of the Great Commission requires recognizing that the Lord Jesus gave five statements of the Great Commission between his resurrection and ascension: John 20:21; Mark 16:15; Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; and Acts 1:8. For a helpful study of these five statements see Marvin J. Newell, *Commissioned: What Jesus Wants You to Know as You Go* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 66.

Commission.<sup>7</sup> In places such as Galatians 4:19 and Philippians 3:12-14, Paul showed his concern for people to continue in the transformation that is part of the Great Commission. The church and the Great Commission are important themes in the New Testament.

The Book of Acts provides a narrative account of these two important themes intertwining.<sup>8</sup> In Acts 2:47, Luke noted that proclaiming the gospel resulted in people joining the faith community. Luke made editorial statements in Acts 5:14, 6:1, and Acts 8 that indicate more people were coming to faith and being added to the church. In Acts 11:19-26, Luke noted that as followers of the Lord Jesus shared the message of the resurrected Savior, many turned to the Lord and became part of the church.<sup>9</sup> The interconnection of the Great Commission and the church is expressed in Paul's journeys in Acts 13 through 19.<sup>10</sup>

As Paul traveled and shared the good news, churches were formed.<sup>11</sup> Tim Chester observed, "For Paul, mission meant planting churches. In the New Testament, local churches were established wherever the gospel was preached. In Acts, Luke deliberately portrays Paul as a church planter."<sup>12</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien observed, "We have already seen, particularly in Acts and the letters of Paul, that the advance of the gospel or the progress of the word of God leads to the founding of settled Christian communities."<sup>13</sup> Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss stated, "One cannot read Acts without noting that nearly everywhere the gospel was preached, communities of believers are formed."<sup>14</sup> Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird noted, "The story and practice of the early church, recorded in Acts, bears this out: the early church implemented the Great Commission mandate primarily by planting churches."<sup>15</sup> Jeff Reed commented, "Acts was a catechism for carrying out the Great Commission, that is, for multiplying churches worldwide."<sup>16</sup> Craig Ott and Gene Wilson wrote, "Two aspects of the Great Commission as formulated in Matthew 28:18-20 entail

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<sup>7</sup> The word "proclaim" in Col 1:28 is viewed as almost a technical term for missionary preaching. The use of teaching in the verse underlines that Paul viewed his ministry not simply as a presentation of the gospel but also called for intense teaching. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 87-88. See also Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 160.

<sup>8</sup> Aubrey Malphurs wrote, "If we desire to know how the early church understood Christ's commission, we can find the answer in the Book of Acts. Acts is a church-planting book because much of what takes place does so in the context of starting churches." Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Guide for New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 25. Hertzberg and Lonsway stated, "Acts is largely devoted to events and circumstances of church planting throughout Asia Minor and Europe." Hertzberg and Lonsway, "Church Planting," 94.

<sup>9</sup> Bock, Acts, 412-16.

<sup>10</sup> Malphurs again noted, "A careful reading of Acts reveals that the early church implemented the Great Commission mandate primarily by planting churches. A study of the missionary journeys recorded in Acts reveals that they, in fact, were church-planting forays into what was predominantly a pagan culture. As a result of these trips, Paul and others planted high-impact churches in key cities such as Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus." Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> The original recipients of the New Testament books 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians were churches that started out of Paul's missionary travels as recorded in Acts 16, 17, 18, and 19.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Chester, "Church Planting: A Theological Perspective," in *Multiplying Churches: Reaching Today's Communities Through Church Planting*, ed. Stephen Timmis (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 267-268.

<sup>14</sup> Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 118.

<sup>15</sup> Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Reed, foreword to *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, by David J. Hesselgrave, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 9.

church planting: the command to baptize and the command to teach obedience to all that Christ commanded. These are virtually impossible to fulfill apart from planting churches.”<sup>17</sup> Those observations led to the conclusion of Richard Yates Hibbert, “Church planting is implied by the Great Commission.”<sup>18</sup>

Though close to two thousand years have passed since the Book of Acts was written, contemporary voices hold that the furtherance of the Great Commission is still connected with church planting. C. Peter Wagner originated an oft-repeated statement concerning church planting, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”<sup>19</sup> Rick Warren, in the foreword of *Viral Churches*, stated, “The single most effective method for fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave us is to plant new churches! Two thousand years of Christian history have proven that new churches grow faster and reach more people than established churches.”<sup>20</sup> Ed Stetzer suggested that to ignite furthering the Great Commission, there is a need for aggressive church planting. He wrote, “Church planting is almost the most effective evangelistic strategy in the world. What’s the most effective? Church multiplication movements. When churches plant lots of other churches, our witness advances exponentially. We need that kind of movement today.”<sup>21</sup>

J. D. Payne expresses his opinion on the issue this way:

Though there is no direct command to plant churches, our Lord was very clear about the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (literally, “peoples,” not nation-states). The best way to fulfill this mandate of evangelizing, baptizing, and teaching obedience is through the planting of contextualized churches among the various people groups and population segments of the world. For it is in the process of evangelizing, baptizing, and teaching that local churches are planted.<sup>22</sup>

Timothy Keller wrote,

Virtually all the great evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are basically calls to plant churches, not simply to share the faith. The ‘Great Commission’ (Matt. 28:18-20) is not just a call to ‘make disciples’ but to ‘baptize.’ In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshipping community with accountability and boundaries (cf. Acts 2:41-47). The only way to be truly sure you

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<sup>17</sup> Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Yates Hibbert, “The Place of Church Planting in Mission: Towards a Theological Framework,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 4 (October 2009): 326.

<sup>19</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Rick Warren, foreword to *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers*, by Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), xi.

<sup>21</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Have Churches Forgotten How to Reproduce?” *Outreach*, March/April 2010, 22.

<sup>22</sup> J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 4. Ott and Strauss expressed a similar thought, “Though there is no command to plant churches, there is the command to baptize (Matt. 28:19-20). Baptism is a sign not only of repentance, forgiveness, and new life (Rom. 6:3-4) but also of enfolded into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) and identification with the new community of faith.” Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 119.

are increasing the number of Christians in a town is to increase the number of churches.<sup>23</sup>

Marvin J. Newell concluded, "Church planting is considered the focal point of Great Commission strategy. . . The two are interrelated and breed each other into existence."<sup>24</sup> A recent article in *Christianity Today* expressed a similar sentiment.<sup>25</sup>

From the brief overview, there appears to be a connection between church planting and furthering the Great Commission both in the biblical record and from the perspective of contemporary church scholars. Hutz Hertzberg and Francis Lonsway noted, "In fact, the expansion of Christianity is inextricably linked to the planting of churches."<sup>26</sup> Chester added, "The story of the church is, therefore, inevitably the story of the seeding, germination, and growth of groups of Christians worshipping, learning, and witnessing together. In other words, church history should always be read and studied with the planting of churches in mind."<sup>27</sup>

Lyle Schaller wrote,

But number one on this list of responses to the Great Commission has always been the creation of new worshipping communities called congregations or parishes or missions or churches. Throughout the centuries this has been the most common attempt to obey that directive of Jesus to make disciples from among those who have been living outside the faith.<sup>28</sup>

The messages of the Bible and contemporary church writers are in agreement: church planting is important to the commission Jesus gave to his followers.<sup>29</sup> To be serious about the Great Commission, it requires giving considerable attention to church planting.<sup>30</sup> A desire to contribute to furthering the Great Commission is to be concerned about and involved in church planting.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Keller, "Why Plant Churches," Redeemer Presbyterian Church, <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/why%20plant%20%2011%20Leaders.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2010). Italics are original.

<sup>24</sup> Newell, *Commissioned*, 105

<sup>25</sup> Tim Stafford, "Go and Plant Churches of All Peoples," *Christianity Today*, September 2007, 69. After dialoguing with Scott Thomas of the Acts 29 Network, Stafford noted, "Biblical rethinking also fuels the conviction that church planting is the ideal way to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission."

<sup>26</sup> Hertzberg and Lonsway, "Church Planting," 93.

<sup>27</sup> Chester, "Church Planting," 47.

<sup>28</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ott and Straus concluded, "That church planting and development must indeed be considered central to the task of missions." Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 119.

<sup>30</sup> David A. Womack opined, "There is only one way the Great Commission can be fulfilled, and that is by establishing gospel-preaching congregations in every community on the face of the earth." David A. Womack, *Breaking the Stained-Glass Barrier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 88.

<sup>31</sup> Newell stated, "The DNA of the Great Commission is summed up with the acronym 'EDP.' The EDP strategy consists of 'Evangelism,' 'Discipleship,' and 'Planting the church.'" Newell, *Commissioned*, 103.