

This Place Needs a Church Plant!

I happened to overhear a public conversation in which the point at issue was this: a certain housing development needed ‘a church plant’. All those taking part in the conversation were fully persuaded of it. One man said that, after all, this is what they did in the New Testament.

This set me thinking.

They were talking about ‘a church plant’. What did they mean by it? Were they talking about a building, a church building, in which to carry out church activities? If so, why does this housing development need such a building?

Or were they talking about setting up a church, a body of believers? If so, why does this housing development need a church?

And is it true that the New Testament shows us that the early believers did this sort of thing? Did the early believers decide to plant churches in unevangelised cities, on housing estates, and the like?

As far as I can see, the New Testament warrants none of this.¹ I know of no such ‘church plant’ in Scripture. And if the people in the conversation had a building in mind, if they were thinking that a church building of some sort was essential, how is it that the early church was not in the least bothered about erecting any building?²

¹ Of course, if the Spirit moves believers into a housing development, and if they are able to form themselves into an *ekklēsia*.... A couple of big ‘if’s there! I, for one, do not know of anything like it. In any case, in this article I am not concerned with that, but with outsiders setting up a church as part of an evangelistic scheme to reach the people living on that housing estate.

² Apart from the very first days in Jerusalem, the early believers met in a believer’s home (Acts 4:23-31; 12:5,12; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). The earliest church building dates from

Of course, it goes deeper than this; far deeper. The real issue is the reasoning behind it all. By talking of ‘a church plant’, what these people wanted was a group of believers to set up an organisation on the housing estate to set up programmes to attract unbelievers to attend that church in order to evangelise them.

Probing deeper still, the core issue is what this ‘evangelism’ is supposed to lead to. And what is that – precisely? Conversions? The fundamental question for those who want this ‘church plant’ with its ministry of attracting unbelievers to church attendance is this: What do they understand by ‘conversion’? Since I have written at large on this and associated issues,³ in this article I will concentrate on the talk of ‘a church plant’.

In saying what I have thus far, I readily admit that I have already put myself out of court with the vast majority of today’s believers, most of whom understand what a ‘church plant’ is, and, I suspect, strongly echo the call for it, taking it for granted, no less. I myself used to. But no longer. Saying this does not turn me into a hyper-Calvinist, however, nor indicate that I have no interest in the conversion of sinners.⁴

about the middle of the third century. This practice, once started, grew rapidly, and the buildings soon became more and more elaborate, especially under Constantine.

³ See my ‘Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder’; *Letting Loose A Gadfly: Edward Miall Speaks Today; To Confront or Not to Confront?: Addresses to Unbelievers; Infant Baptism Tested; Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners; The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion; The Secret Stifler: Incipient Sandemanianism and Preaching the Gospel to Sinners; The Seeking Sinner: Fact or Figment?; Saving Faith*. Above all, see my forthcoming *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*.

⁴ My works belie the accusation. See, for instance, my *The Gospel Offer Is Free...; Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism; Septimus Sears: A Victorian Injustice*

As I read the New Testament, believers took the gospel to unbelievers, preached the gospel to them – I use the word ‘preach’ in its widest new-covenant sense – saw sinners converted – that is, convicted of sin, brought to repentance and saving trust in Christ – whereupon they baptised them upon their profession of faith – that is, they dipped, immersed them in water – and then continued to teach them the law of Christ. This, after all, is precisely the mandate issued by Christ:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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 (Matt. 28:18-20).

And how were churches formed? On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached, and sinners were convicted and converted. Then, we are expressly told:

So those who received [Peter’s] word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and... prayers... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:41-47).

In other words, gospel preaching led to conversion, including baptism, which led to the formation of a church – the exact opposite of what is being proposed by ‘a church plant’. In the New Testament, there is not the slightest hint of forming a church to attract unbelievers into long-term attendance in order to evangelise them. Rather, churches were raised as a result of conversions. A church plant, however, is an activity designed to attract unbelievers to attend church that they might be evangelised.

and Its Aftermath; No Safety Before Saving Faith...; ‘Gospel Snippets’.

I agree that the two passages I have quoted refer to what happened at the beginning of the gospel age, on the day of Pentecost and just after. But as far as I can tell, the basic pattern never varied. Take Acts 16, for instance. Think about Philippi. Nobody planted a church in Philippi. But an *ekklēsia* was formed there. How?

Under the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Silas went to Philippi, a city made up of Greeks, Romans, Jews and pagans – but no believers. These two believers did not set up a church – they did not plant a church – to attract unbelievers so that they might evangelise them. Not at all! Rather, under the Spirit’s impulse, using their commonsense, they sought and took every opportunity of meeting unbelievers in order to directly and pointedly preach the gospel to them. By God’s grace, they saw sinners converted, whereupon they baptised them. These new converts, having come together through their conversion and baptism, were formed into a church – an *ekklēsia* – a church without any premises. The church was not planted from outside, but was raised up by the Spirit through conversions under the preaching of the gospel. This *ekklēsia* met in a home of one of the members in order to carry out their mutual responsibilities and enjoy the privileges granted them by Christ in the new covenant. All, from first to last, was by the Holy Spirit’s sovereign power and direction. All church activities were entirely internal, consisting of the believers’ mutual edification, and the glorification of God among themselves.

These are serious issues. In the New Testament, there is no thought of ‘planting a church’ with the design of attracting unbelievers so that they might be evangelised. At the very least, such an idea puts the cart before the horse. According to the New Testament pattern, a church can only be planted – actually, it would be better described as ‘raised up’ – through conversions by the Spirit. Not only does ‘church planting’ invert this order, it is based on an idea utterly at variance with the New Testament. The church has no business attracting

unbelievers to itself – churchifying unbelievers – in order to evangelise them.

I say again, these are very serious issues. For when I speak of the New Testament, I am not talking merely in a historical sense. I really mean the new covenant. And what happened at Philippi (and elsewhere in Acts) is the pattern for the entire age in which we are living; as Christ said, it is ‘to the end of the age’ (Matt. 28:20). Talk of church planting maybe commonplace today, but it is unknown in the New Testament.

I know this sounds a jarring note. But before you dismiss my claims, I ask you to be a Berean (Acts 17:11), and search the Scriptures to see if what I have said is right.