

# The Bible on Church Planting MOVEMENTS:



Contributions by Steve Smith and Steve Addison

## Qualified to Lead?

**A** common criticism of church-planting movements (CPMs) is that fairly new believers become leaders of churches. This seems to contradict what Paul says about the qualifications of overseers:

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. (1 Tim. 3:6, NIV)

However, this is not Paul's only list of qualifications for overseers. We must apply biblical expectations for leaders *appropriate to their stage of responsibility and development*. The prohibition about new converts above is very important – for the right setting.

Paul actually gives *two* lists of qualifications for church leaders in his epistles – Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Both lists are important, but are appropriate for completely different contexts.

In Titus, it is clear that there are a number of new churches around the island in the various cities. Paul has given Titus the responsibility for completing the foundation for the movement in Crete (1:5) by appointing leaders for these new churches. Evidently *all of the believers* are young in their faith at this point. Out of this group, Paul gives Titus clear guidelines

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for the type of men to select. *Therefore, the list given in Titus 1 is the list to use in NEW CHURCH situations.*

Contrast this with the 1 Timothy 3 list. When Paul writes Timothy, he instructs him on what to look for in new leaders who felt God calling them to serve as overseers. The church and this CPM are mature, probably 10-15 years old! *Therefore, the list given in 1 Timothy 3 is the list for MATURE CHURCHES.* This explains the differences between the two lists.

Character First: The first obvious lesson from the two lists is the focus on *character over skills*. In looking for the basic qualifications for church leadership, character is paramount.

What a contrast to what we often look for: educational credentials; experience; preaching eloquence, etc. If we can get people with growing character, then we have good material from which to develop the appropriate skill sets.

## The key differences

In the two lists there are four key differences. Understanding these differences helps us to adjust our expectations for new leaders in new groups and movements.

### Difference 1: Appoint versus Aspire

In the mature CPM in the province of Asia, a spiritual environment had developed that may resemble the one you grew up in. Believers and churches were maturing. Leaders were prevalent. Many godly examples of leadership were evident to younger believers on a weekly basis. As these younger believers followed the Lord, He put on their hearts a desire to serve Him in greater ways – as church leaders or missionaries. They felt a “call” from God – just like you may have:

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man *aspires* to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (1 Tim. 3:1, NASB, emphasis added)

Out of the many who aspired, Timothy had to discern if they were *qualified* to lead at this level yet. In contrast, in the emerging movement on Crete, the new believers had very little concept of what a church leader looked like. They had no aspirations to lead. Until a spiritual climate of leadership aspiration developed, it was Titus' responsibility to *appoint* or choose new leaders. He was going to have to find qualified leaders, speak to them about their potential, and ease them into leadership.

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and *appoint* elders in every city as I directed you. (Titus 1:5, NASB, emphasis added)

The word in the Greek for "appoint" here is very similar to the meaning of the word for "appoint" in Acts 14:23:

When they had *appointed* elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23, NASB, emphasis added)

Toward the end of their first journey, with churches that were weeks and months old, Paul and Barnabas did exactly what Paul was asking Titus to do: he appointed young believers to lead the new churches. In the beginning of a CPM or a new church start, you must be very proactive in choosing and developing leaders based on their faithfulness and fruitfulness. You must take some risks and then "commend them to God's care." Some will not make it (e.g. Judas), but that is a risk you must take to develop leaders. They will not aspire; you must appoint.

One principle that can help is to appoint *multiple leaders in each church*. That is the meaning behind the Greek in Acts 14:23: Paul and Barnabas appointed multiple elders in each church they started. Because your new leaders are still fairly young believers with not many skills, this helps them share the load and reduces the fear factor. It provides a safer environment in which to grow.

### Difference 2: Not a New Convert

A second major difference between the two lists is that Paul removes the prohibition ("not a new

convert") for the Cretan situation. Why? Because all he had were new converts, just like Acts 14:23! When all you have are new converts, you must develop some of them to lead the others.

Paul replaces the new convert prohibition with the "devout" qualification which is not in Timothy's list. In essence he says this: "Titus, even though you may have to appoint a new convert as leader, make sure he is devout – devoted to Jesus."

### Why the prohibition against new converts in 1 Tim. 3:6?

Paul says, "*he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.*" Paul essentially says: "In a mature church, don't you dare make a new convert a leader of a mature group. He'll become proud and then fall quickly!"

When all you have are new converts, though, you must develop some of them to lead the others.

### Difference 3: The "No Longers" of Titus 1

Look at the qualifications in Titus' list. Note how many of them begin with "not." In the Greek, another way to translate "not" in a context like this is "no longer." Look at how the list changes:

- *No longer* living wild
- *No longer* rebelling
- *No longer* living for oneself
- *No longer* quick to get angry
- *No longer* addicted to alcohol
- *No longer* violent
- *No longer* living for money

The implication of the "nots" or "no longer" is that many of these people *used to be that way*. Look at what kind of starting material they came from:

Even one of their own prophets has said, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith. (Titus 1:12-13, NIV)

Titus wasn't starting from great material. He wasn't working with moral Jews or God-fearers who obeyed the Old Testament Law (Titus 3:3). These were recently carnal pagans turned children of God! So, the instruction Paul gave him was this: "Look for people who are getting their lives cleaned up: people who are no longer selfish hedonists, drunkards, fighters, rebels or materialists. Find people who are changing."

In Ephesus, on the contrary, the qualifications were stricter. Look at the contrasts. Timothy receives a "matured" version of Titus' list.

Crete (earlier)	Ephesus (later)
No longer living wild	Worthy of respect
Not quick-tempered or harsh	Gentle
Not greedy	Free from even the love of money

That's a guideline for choosing leaders in new churches: look for the "no longer's." They are not perfect or mature yet, but they are growing in godly character. Therefore, they can be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). They are people that other new believers can emulate in life transformation.

#### **Difference 4: "Hold Fast" the Word versus "Able to Teach" the Word**

There is one very important skill that church leadership demands: they must uphold the Word of God and guide their flock to understand and obey it. This is a non-negotiable.

The difference in the two lists, however, is the leader's ability in relation to the Word.

**Holding fast** the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1:9, NASB, emphasis added)

**Able to teach** . . . (1 Tim. 3:2, NASB, emphasis added)

The only way leaders can faithfully lead their churches and keep them within doctrinal purity and moral uprightness is by leading them to value the Scripture as their authority by obeying whatever it says. Holding the word as authoritative and obeying whatever it says are the twin banks to keep the movement within doctrinal orthodoxy and moral purity. In new church situations, however, a new convert is not yet able to teach the Word, at least not eloquently.

For a mature church a basic skill is the ability to teach the Word of God to the flock. What is required in a new church? The new leader must hold fast the Word so that he can use it as the authority for encouraging and correcting the flock. He

may not be able to teach well yet (a skill he will learn) but he must value the Word and turn to it for answers. With the Scripture as his guide, he can exhort/encourage and refute people with sound doctrine. With leaders in new church situations, use the Titus qualifications: make sure they love the Word and rely on it as their authority for leading the flock.

"Qualified to Lead," adapted from Steve Smith's new book, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Richmond: WIGTake Resources, 2011). Steve is a veteran missionary and CPM trainer with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

#### **What Jesus began, continued, and is doing today**

In his final instructions to the apostles Jesus says nothing about planting churches. In the Gospels he rarely mentions "church" at all—just two references in Matthew. Jesus' central concern is the dawn of the kingdom of God.

This has led one scholar to quip, "Jesus preached the kingdom, but what he got was the church." A recurring sentiment in the discussion of mission for the last century—at least in the West.

It appears that the current obsession with "church-planting movements" by some lacks a solid foundation in the teaching and mission of Jesus.

Let's revisit the accounts of Jesus' ministry and ask, "What did Jesus begin?"

#### **What Jesus began to do**

Around 29 AD Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God, casting out demons and healing the sick.

From town to town, in the synagogues of Galilee, by the shores of the lake, in the open fields, in the market places and in homes Jesus declared that Yahweh was establishing his rule in the midst of the people.

Growing up in Nazareth Jesus learned at home and in the local synagogue that there was one God, Yahweh, who is Creator and Lord of all. Beginning with Abraham, Yahweh, chose Israel to be his witness to the world. Through Israel the nations (Gentiles) would be drawn into God's salvation. As he studied the book of Isaiah Jesus read how in the "last days" God would send his Servant to suffer and die so that through faithful Israel, the nations would hear the good news (gospel) of salvation.

Jesus focused his ministry on the “lost sheep of Israel,” the people chosen to be a witness to the world. Yet he was clearly aware of God’s concern for all nations. Israel was Jesus’ priority because the world was his mission field.

During his ministry, he prepared his disciples for a worldwide mission.

Jesus did not teach his disciples merely to add to their knowledge. He taught them to obey. Their classes were conducted on the road. In the hurly burly of life, mission and relationships, Jesus disciplined them as a group to be a community on mission. They were to be the nucleus of the new people of God.

As the disciples followed Jesus, he trained them to be “fishers of people.” They were to recruit more people who will become followers of Jesus and join the movement Jesus was forming.

Communities of disciples are the fruit of Jesus’ kingdom ministry. Jesus founded a missionary movement that would make disciples and multiply churches throughout the world.

### **What Jesus continued to do**

In the opening verse of Acts, Luke writes, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach . . .” I’ve read that verse hundreds of times. Until recently I never noticed the word “began.” What Jesus began in the Gospels, he continues in the story of the early church.

The book of Acts has one theme—the continuing ministry of the risen Lord Jesus. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of what Jesus began to do and teach. In Acts, Luke tells the story of what Jesus continued to do and teach through his disciples (1:1-2).

We suffer under the assumption that Jesus, risen and ascended to the Father, has handed over his mission for us to complete. Luke disagrees.

Jesus’ resurrection means we do not inherit our task from Christ, we share in his mission. We are not his successors, but his companions.

Jesus is risen and ascended to the Father, but he is not absent and he is not passive.

Following Jesus’ trial and execution Jesus’ disciples were a defeated rabble. If it had been left to them to take up the mission of Jesus, the movement he founded would never have survived.

Instead, just as the Roman and Jewish authorities

were sure the crisis sparked by Jesus was over, it was upon them again, in a new form. The crucified Messiah was among his followers, alive and continuing his ministry.

At Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled his promise to pour out the Spirit. The result was the formation of the new people of God who live under his rule. Every day it is the “Lord” who adds to their number, those who are being saved (2:42-47). He is the one who brings people to faith and creates new communities of disciples.

In Acts, Jesus himself speaks through his witnesses, and as he does, his word grows and spreads and multiplies. New disciples are made and new churches are formed.

In Luke’s three accounts of Saul’s conversion (Acts 9; 22; and 26), Jesus is in charge. He shattered Saul’s world, he commanded and Saul obeyed. He appointed Saul, the destroyer of the church, to be his servant and his witness. He promised him protection from all his opponents.

Paul’s mission was the Lord’s, not Paul’s. When Paul proclaimed the gospel, the risen Lord would open eyes, and turn both Jews and Gentiles from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Jesus was the one who would grant forgiveness of sins, and a place among God’s people (26:17-18).

What was true for Paul is true for all—the risen Lord continues his ministry through his disciples. He is present with them. He calls them, directs them, he protects them, and speaks through them.


As disciples are made and churches formed Luke can say, “the word grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24). The obstacles are immense, yet Jesus’ presence and power ensures the gospel’s advance throughout the world.

The book of Acts tells the story of the progress of the gospel from a small gathering of Jesus’ Jewish disciples in Jerusalem, across religious, ethnic, relational and geographic boundaries, to Paul’s bold and unhindered preaching of the risen and ascended Jesus to Gentiles in Rome.

Acts is a story of missionary expansion, begun with the promise of the Risen Lord that his disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came on them and they would be his witness to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The word of God travels to the end of the earth, conquering the world in the process. Its goal is the creation of the community of the true people of God.

This unstoppable advance is not without its challenges

The background features a light, artistic illustration of a landscape. In the foreground, there are stylized trees with long, thin branches and leaves. In the middle ground, a church with a prominent cross on its roof is visible. The background shows rolling hills and a bright sky with some light clouds. The overall style is soft and illustrative.

and setbacks. Progress is met with violent opposition. Yet the word continues to spread and grow. Luke records the spread of the word south to Ethiopia and Cyrenaica; east to Arabia, Elam, Media and Parthia; north to the coast of the Aegean Sea; and west to Rome and projects it on to distant Tarsus.

Acts begins with Jesus' command is to go to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). Acts finishes with the goal unreached. Rome is not the end of the earth, it is the center of the empire.

Luke's last progress report (Acts 28: 30-31) has Paul, in custody in Rome, unhindered as he proclaims the gospel of the kingdom. This open-ended ending shows that the progress of the word is ongoing.

Acts ends, but the missionary expansion does not. Luke doesn't tell us what happened to Paul, but he leaves us in no doubt that despite the obstacles and suffering his servants face, the word will continue to grow, and spread and multiply. God will do it.

Luke challenges his readers—us included—to follow Jesus and finish the task.

By 300 AD, before the Emperor Constantine has thrown his support behind the Christian faith, there

were 5-9 million followers of Jesus in the Roman Empire, around 10 percent of the population. Never before has a movement achieved such success without any economic, military, or cultural power to support. Jesus founded history's greatest missionary movement intent on reaching the world. The resources he provided were the gospel, his presence through the Holy Spirit, and the authority to make disciples who multiplied churches everywhere they went.

### **What Jesus is doing today**

Acts is about the continuation of the ministry of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel of salvation through Christ is proclaimed in word and deed. As the Word advances, disciples are made and new communities are formed from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Disciples and churches are the fruit of Jesus' kingdom ministry.

That's what Jesus began, it's what the Risen Lord continued to do in Acts, and it's what he is doing today.

"What Jesus Began," by Australian Steve Addison, author of *Movements that Change the World* (Smyrna, DE: Missional Press, 2009). Visit Steve's website at: <http://www.movements.net/blog>.