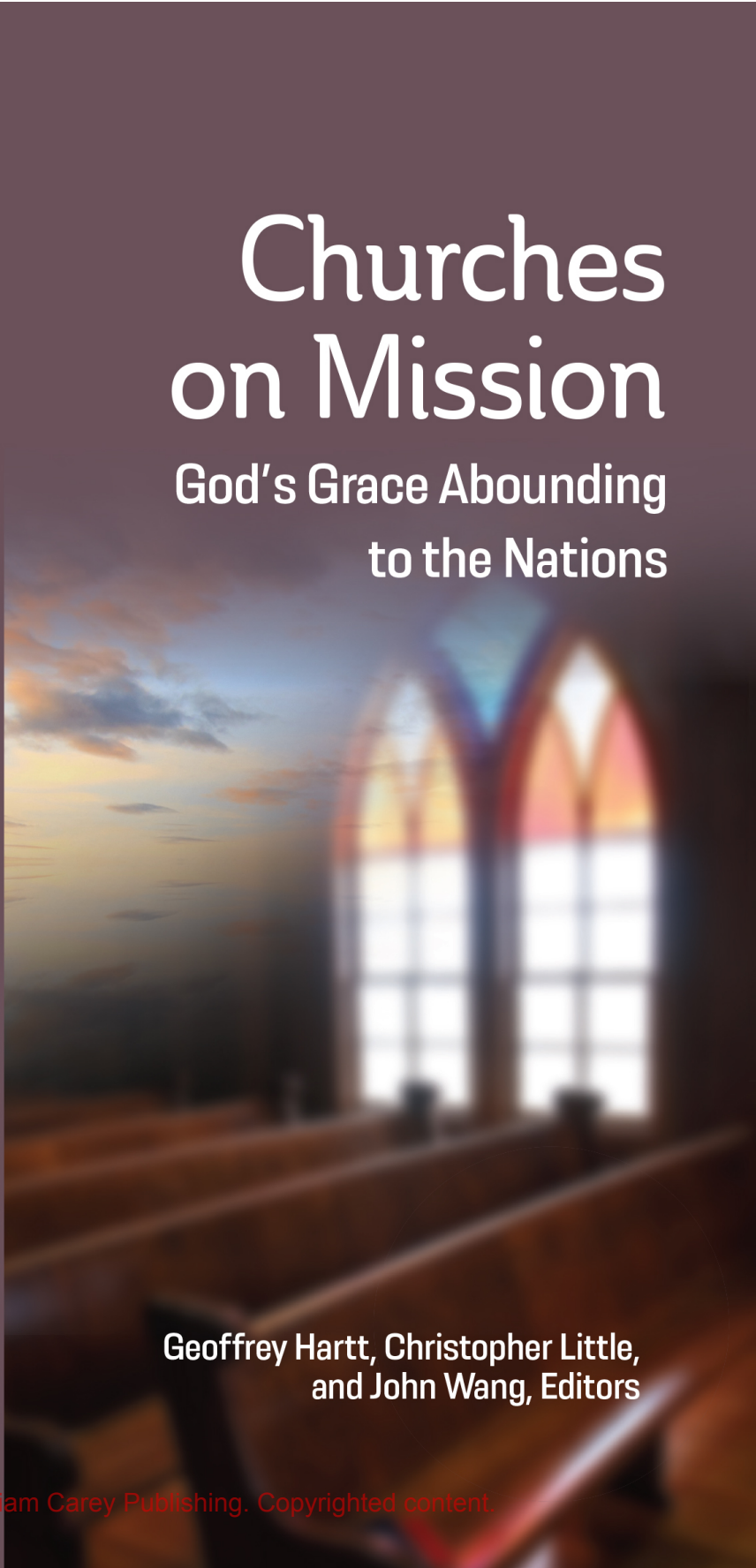
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Churches on Mission

God's Grace Abounding to the Nations



Geoffrey Hartt, Christopher Little, and John Wang, Editors

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Churches on Mission: God's Grace Abounding to the Nations

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1 BASIC CHURCH

FREEING CROSS-CULTURAL CHURCH PLANTING WITH NEW TESTAMENT ESSENTIALS*

J. Scott Horrell

Missionaries today are aware that much of what has been exported or repeated in missional church planting remains freighted with North Atlantic and traditional institutionalism that is often peripheral to New Testament (NT) church essentials. These same ecclesial structures and ways of doing church have been and sometimes are perpetuated by well-intentioned second- and third-generation leaders who replicate these forms—forms through which they themselves responded to the gospel in years past. For all of us, loyalties to particular ecclesiologies (if not denominations) lie embedded in our experience with the God we love. Yet what worked well in one generation and culture does not necessarily transfer to another. In church planting, a living ecclesiology is as vital to missions as vigorous missions is to ecclesiology.

One group of pastors in São Paulo, Brazil lamented that the concept of *church* in their own congregations—said to be typical of tens of thousands of congregations around the world—centers in four images: a church building (or "temple"); Sunday as the "Christian Sabbath"; the worship service (the more powerful the better); and the full-time pastor ("the man of God" and mediator) (Kivitz 1995, 37–56). In the mind of most believers, if one of these four standards is lacking then one does not truly have a church.

Many in evangelical missions agree that these kinds of preconceived ecclesiologies undermine effective cross-cultural church planting as well as the growth of existing churches. Yet a glance around the world suggests that most church planters, whether indigenous or cross-cultural, repeat traditional or preconceived concepts of what the church is. By so doing, some church planters assume that they protect "sound doctrine," others that they continue a denominational heritage, still others seek to clone the megachurch or nouvelle structure through which they have been commissioned. I suggest, however, that the need is to return to the primal experiential dimensions of NT Christianity. A more biblical ecclesiology

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in fact sets church planting movements free to mold their "forms" to the central "functions" of the NT church.[1]

This article proposes a flexible ecclesiology that maximizes the spiritual functions/activities of the NT church with minimal prescribed structures and organization. If the local church is especially observed through its NT functions, then our ecclesial structures should be highly adaptable to specific cultures and circumstances. In no sense does this work intend to define an entire ecclesiology. Rather, in brief strokes I will set forth two theological principles helpful to church planting.

1. *The church exists as a decentralized form of the kingdom of God*. In defining the church as the body of Christ, I argue that the church exists in some ways as the dialectic antithesis to Old Testament (OT) Israel. Whereas through Moses and David the OT kingdom of God was *centralized* in a geography, racial lineage, Sabbath, and professional priesthood, in the NT the outward form of God's kingdom is precisely the opposite—centralized in Christ but *decentralized* geographically, organizationally, temporally, and ethnically in its expansion throughout the earth.

2. *The local church is practically defined by NT functions*. Regarding the forms and structures of the earliest local churches, Gerald Bray observes:

   The evidence of the New Testament is not sufficiently detailed to allow us to re-create an authentically "biblical" church to the exclusion of any alternative. It may have been the case that individual congregations were organized along different lines but we do not have enough details to be able to compare one with another. It may also be that many of the churches lacked any fixed organization. Perhaps they operated on a fairly *ad hoc* basis, with little sense that there was only one right way of doing things. (2016, 42)

1 Allison divides current ecclesiological models into three clusters: functional, teleological, and ontological ecclesiologies (he affirms the last) (2012, 50–53). During the 1970s and 80s, functional ecclesiologies were often at the forefront of missional church planting. In recent years, the functional methodologies have been overshadowed by ontological (theological) or more teleological (pragmatic) models. I suggest that we can affirm an ontological model (the divinely given nature of the church) without losing the richness of identifying early church's central activities as instructive for what the church should be.

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If the NT reflects ambiguity regarding organizational forms, what appears far more tangible are the God-glorifying activities of the early church. That is, in terms directly relevant to church planting, the local church is identified and measured especially through its primary activities in response to its Lord. What the church is by nature (theologically) should be reflected in the intentional, Spirit-generated functions of local churches. Thus ontology (what God has made the church) and functionality (how God's people rightly respond) are closely related. While necessarily having some organizational structure, the local church is designed to reflect its Lord through its activities of worship, teaching/disciple-forming, fellowship, and evangelism/mission. Whether in missional church planting or established local churches, the forms of a local church (excepting certain NT directives) are flexible and subordinate to the NT functions that reflect what God has ordained the church to be.

The work concludes with suggestions on how better to initiate and nurture local churches in a widely diverse world. With a theological ecclesiology in place, church planting methodology advances as creative interplay with culture as guided by the Holy Spirit. A student of the target culture, working together with believers indigenous to a particular setting, will seek to test and mold forms (organization, appearance, etc.) to that which best facilitates NT functions.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS: TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR CHURCH PLANTING

From the outset, certain assumptions need to be clarified. First, the people of God should be reflective of the triune God they claim to worship (cf. John 17:18; 20:21). Within progressive revelation, the *Missio Dei* as God's creative, graceful movement toward humankind provides the metanarrative for why both OT Israel and the NT church exist (Tennent 2010, 53–101; Sanders 2010, 127–66; Horrell 2009, 13–24). That God should work in different ways throughout the history of salvation reflects the unity and diversity within the holy Trinity itself.

Second, affirming the pattern of the book of Acts and more broadly the entire NT as written to the church, a missional hermeneutic is encouraged. The overarching covenants to Adam, Noah, and Abraham point to the grace of God offered finally to all humanity (Peters 1972, 83–102; Wright, 2005, 324–29). So all the Bible, but specifically the post-Pentecost NT, informs church planting efforts in a largely Gentile world.

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Third, the NT clearly does *prescribe* formal aspects for the local church, notably qualified leadership, regular gathering together as "church," and the practices of baptism and the Eucharist. On the other hand, not everything *described* in the NT is universally mandated. NT patterns guide but are not necessarily constrictive to innovational forms for the local church.

Last, this work does not intend to criticize more highly organized ecclesiologies. Indeed, more formal denominational ecclesiologies are sometimes helpful in church multiplication. Moreover such church structures give leadership and accountability to newer church planting efforts. Rather this essay seeks to define the essential functions of the NT church as criteria for evaluating the forms and multiple activities of today's churches. A host of missional church planting books are on the market today, most of them with valuable contributions.[2] I will argue for a simple (perhaps controversial) template for the local church—one as adaptable in Tehran or rural Cameroon as in Shanghai, Paris, or Chicago. As such, the paper is designed to complement established ecclesial and missional forms by stimulating new possibilities, as well as to orient church planting efforts in situations calling for radical adaptations. In short, this proposal seeks a minimalist ecclesiology that maintains NT mandates regarding structure while emphasizing NT functions as the primary measure of the local church.

CHURCH AS A DECENTRALIZED KINGDOM

The Bible itself attests to progressive revelation with significant differences between OT Israel and the NT church.[3] Whatever one's eschatology and however much similarity or dissimilarity one finds between Israel as God's theocratic kingdom and the NT church, certain distinctions are paradigmatic. Four categorical differences distinguish OT Israel and the NT church, with significant missiological implications.

2 Works widely used in evangelical church planting include: Allen 1962; Dever 2013; Hesselgrave 2000; Hill 2012, 2016; Keller 2012; Malphurs 2004 and 2011; Ott and Wilson 2011; Payne 2009; Rainer and Geiger 2006; Stanley 2012; Stetzer and Im 2016; Warren 1995.

3 A host of works debate whether OT Israel is the church and whether the NT church is the New Israel. For a variety of views see: Brand 2015; Wellum and Parker 2016; Blaising and Bock 1992 and 1993; Carson 2016. My own view is set forth in Horrell 2004, 29–52. For more detailed information, see Bray 2016,14–29, Ferguson 1996, 60–69, and Allison 2012, 61–122. In my understanding, the universal church is constituted by all regenerate believers in Jesus Christ beginning with the baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost, united under the headship of Christ, and present in believing local churches and fellowships throughout the world.

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GEOGRAPHY

From the earliest covenants with Abraham, central to Jewish identity is the "land"—found over 2,500 times as the fourth most common noun in the OT (Gen 12:1–3; 15:7–20; 17:8). The Promised Land figures prominently in the Exodus, Joshua's conquest, the ensuing wars up to (and after) the Davidic kingdom, the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles, subsequent returns to the land, and the Jewish tenacity to live in and defend the land even today (cf. Brueggeman 2002, esp. 1–45; McDermott 2012, 29–40 and 2016, 11–22; Bock and Glasser 2014, 71–82). Not only is the land of Israel endemic to OT theology, David's Jerusalem becomes the City of God and Zion the Mountain of God. Even more concentrically defined, Solomon's Temple and later temples were structures erected both to invite yet keep out the foreigner, women, Jewish laity, and finally everyone but the high priest from the Holy of Holies, the epicenter of God's presence on earth. The invitation to the nations was to come to Jerusalem and worship the only true God, "bring an offering and come into his courts" (Ps 96:8).

With the NT church a geographic inversion occurs. Believers are commissioned to go into all the world. For the church, finally, there is no geographic center, no Promised Land, no Jerusalem, no temple, no altar, no Rome, no houses of God. Where two or three are gathered Christ is present. Early Christians met wherever they could in both public and private spaces. While literature mentions church buildings from the end of the second century, prior to Constantine "it is uncertain whether these were existing structures remodeled for church use…or new constructions" (Ferguson 2008). It's not that church buildings are unhelpful as local meeting places for believers; rather (unlike the temple), church buildings themselves are unessential. The local church can meet anywhere.

RACIAL LINEAGE

The children of Abraham are God's covenantal people. Not Ishmael, not Esau, but through Isaac and Jacob, the Lord God promises to multiply the patriarchs' children like the stars of the sky and the dust of the earth (Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14). That Rahabs and Ruths are incorporated into the chosen people reflects a coming universality and God's grace to the world. Yet in

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