

VOL. 1 • NO. 1 • SUMMER 2009  
**ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH PLANTERS:  
A SUGGESTED APPROACH FOR STARTING  
(AND CONTINUING) THE CONVERSATION**

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I am very thankful to be asked to write this article for the inaugural edition of this journal under a new name. I consider the invitation an honor. Since April 2009, when I presented a paper to the Southeastern Regional Evangelical Missiological Society entitled “Ethical Guidelines for Church Planters: A Suggested Proposal,” I have been pleasantly surprised at the constructive feedback received from across denominational lines. Having been involved in church planting contexts in both the field and the classroom for the past decade, I wrote this paper to begin a long overdue conversation addressing missiological stewardship. It is my prayer that the publication of this article will continue to serve as a catalyst to get us thinking, discussing, and acting on the need to apply kingdom standards to our missionary practices, without succumbing to an ungodly amount of pragmatism and American cultural Christianity.

**what i hope to accomplish**

The purpose of this article is to make a suggestion to you. The suggestion is that church planters, regardless of their ministry contexts, need to develop a set of

ethical guidelines to direct their missionary practices. In this article, I wish to suggest that the place to begin is with eleven particular guidelines.

### **what i am not suggesting**

Now I recognize the thought of a set of ethical guidelines is not very appealing to most of us. Maybe it has something to do with my Gen-X, “down-with-the-Man” nature. For, even when I hear the phrase “a set of ethical guidelines,” I get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach and start reaching for my Pepto. I automatically assume that such a set of instructions is designed to be restricting rather than liberating, binding a person rather than freeing one to do the ministry to which he or she is called. However, the suggestion found in this article is meant to be liberating; for as we seek to apply a Kingdom Ethic to our practices, we find the yoke of Jesus is easy and the burden is light (Matt. 11:30).

66 I wish to be clear on two matters before we continue. First, I am not stating church planters across the globe should have a universal code of ethics that is developed by me or someone else. A specific universal code would be written without taking the planters’ contexts into account and in all likelihood would be ethnocentric and lack relevance. While the Kingdom Ethic is a universal, teams must have the freedom to place emphasis on particular matters related to their specific contexts.

Second, this article does not suggest a code of ethical behavior whereby missionaries agree to avoid immorality and treat other people fairly. I recognize that whenever most of us hear the word “ethics” or “code of ethics,” we typically think of some plan to avoid immorality or harming another human, such as a medical code of ethics. I assume that by the very nature of the calling to serve as a church planter, such matters are already understood. My argument is that many church planters are adopting missionary practices that do not reflect an application of healthy biblical missiology.

### **why a need for ethical guidelines**

The matters of concern that I have are at least two fold. First, church planting is a very difficult ministry. The challenges are great, the spiritual warfare is intensive, and a suggested set of guidelines for keeping missionary practice within healthy parameters can assist in keeping church planters focused, especially when the challenges arise.

Second, a set of ethical guidelines can also help maintain the health of both

the church planters and the new churches. Being determined to ground all of their practices in the Kingdom Ethic before they begin their labors, church planters will be better prepared to avoid the temptations to make compromises when the challenges arrive. Also, following healthy practices increases the likelihood for planting healthy churches.

### **missionary practices are to be guided by the kingdom ethic**

As followers of Jesus, missionaries are kingdom citizens bound to live life according to a Kingdom Ethic. The ethic of a kingdom citizen transcends the ethic of this world. For example, we read of Jesus making audacious statements contrasting the ethic of this world with the Kingdom Ethic. “You have heard that it was said . . . ,” Jesus would state. “But I say to you . . .” He would then declare His teaching about the way of life for kingdom citizens (Matt. 5:21, 22, 27, 28, ESV). Numerous times He would make statements that would fly in the face of cultural expectations regarding race, prestige, service, wealth, love, etc.

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The Ethic of the Kingdom is an ethic that transcends the ethic of this world. The Kingdom Ethic teaches us how to live in relation to God, in relation to other brothers and sisters in the kingdom, and in relation to those outside of the kingdom. While we are quick to attribute actions and matters of character to the auspices of the Kingdom Ethic, practically, we tend to relegate missionary practices outside of the ethic’s jurisdiction. Missionary practices, however, are not exceptions to the Kingdom Ethic but rather ethical reflections of biblical foundations. Orthopraxy must be driven by orthodoxy. Poor missionary practices are not simply poor practices but rather a neglect of the moral duty and proper stewardship of a kingdom citizen.

### **eleven suggested guidelines**

The following are eleven suggested ethical guidelines that I wish to set before church planters in the West for consideration to be included in their standards for missiological accountability. I offer this list as a place to begin. It is my hope the following guidelines will help stimulate conversation, leading to accountability for healthy missionary practices in contexts throughout the world.

*We will begin our ministries among people with the greatest need for the Gospel and with a high level of receptivity to the Gospel.*

Since the Great Commission is a command and the global need for the Gospel is so great, unless God reveals otherwise, church planters should focus the bulk of

their attentions among populations where the evangelical presence is low and the receptivity is high. Such a guideline is not designed to withhold the Gospel from anyone, but rather to provide a starting point for missionary teams by assisting them to be good stewards with the opportunities they have.

The exception to this guideline is found in the leading of the Holy Spirit. For some church planters, their calling is to be an Isaiah, an Ezekiel, or a William Carey, to labor in areas where the soil is hard and where there will be little, and in some cases, no converts after many years of service. Such a calling is good, noble, and legitimate, and should not be disdained by church planters not called to such peoples. While such a calling is real and necessary to take the Gospel to all nations (Matt. 24:14), I believe such a calling is the exception and not the norm. Therefore, if the calling of God is not to be a Jeremiah and labor in hard soil areas, church planters should begin laboring in areas where the need for an evangelical witness is high *and* receptivity to the Gospel is high.

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*We will develop strategies that involve the use of church planting methods that are highly reproducible by the people we are called to serve.*

Since the world consists of four billion unbelievers with two billion people who have never heard the Gospel, it is unethical for church planters to not think about church multiplication and labor using methods that are not highly reproducible by the people coming into the kingdom. The contemporary paradigm of planting one church that requires several years of labor, high levels of financial resources, advanced leadership skills and talents, scores of people, and complex strategies and methods is not conducive to the advancement of the kingdom in light of the global need. Such an approach does not reflect wise missiological thinking and is not likely to result in the multiplication of disciples, leaders, and churches across the globe.

*We will not prioritize transfer growth over conversion growth by designing ministries that will primarily attract believers.*

Biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches. Such is the biblical way. Missionaries must begin and carry out their labors in light of what it is going to take to abundantly sow the Gospel seed and see people come to faith. I am amazed at the numbers of church planters that design ministries and use church planting models and methods that fundamentally are designed to attract people who are already kingdom citizens. Unbelievers are not interested in exciting worship services, great children's ministries, and contemporary praise music.

*We will keep in mind the other evangelical pastors who labor in the same areas as our team.*

Since the unity of believers in a geographical area is a powerful witness to the Gospel, church planters must take the initiative to meet with other evangelical church leaders and share with them their callings and visions to reach people in the same communities. Unfortunately, in many parts of the United States and Canada, the notion of “turfism” is very prevalent. Many church leaders have a parish mentality, believing they are going to reach everyone in their area, and anyone else who attempts to minister in the area are competitors rather than partners.

Meeting with other pastors in the area will help alleviate some of the tensions that may arise in the future. This meeting should not only involve an attempt to maintain healthy fellowship, but also to share with such local church leaders the team’s ethical guidelines, especially how they plan to respond to the matter of transfer growth (see next guideline).

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*We will have a systematic plan to respond to the transfers who want to become part of the new church.*

Transfer growth will come to those who are laboring in Western nations. Out of a desire to respect other evangelical churches within their areas, a desire for biblical church planting, and a desire for sanctification in the lives of the transfers, church planting teams must be prepared to respond to transfer growth. A team should determine beforehand they will do everything to prevent such growth.

One particular approach to this matter involves discouraging potential transfers from becoming a part of the new church while encouraging them to return to their churches to serve the kingdom. Teams should also contact the pastors for follow up. They should share with them that one of their members showed interest in being a part of the new church but that they were encouraged to return to their fellowship. Such a notification assists with the important task of pastoral care. While not always the case, sometimes there is a sin issue that needs to be addressed in the life of this dear brother or sister wishing to leave his or her church family. The pastors deserve to know what is taking place in the hearts and minds of the flocks under their care. If the team, the established church and its leadership, and the potential transfers all agree that it is of the Lord for such transfer growth to occur for the advancement of the Gospel, then transfer growth should be permitted.

A caveat must be mentioned here. Frequently, I will hear from church planters of their support of transfer growth. Such is found in both their words as well as the

methods they use, which appeal primarily to kingdom citizens. The argument used to justify this common Western church planting approach is the belief that “there are no strong churches in this area.” When this cryptic phrase is translated it usually means, “There are no churches in this area of the brand that I prefer.” While I am certain there are places throughout the Western world whereby even the evangelical churches of the area are unfaithful to the Lord in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, I do not believe such places are as omnipresent as many church planters advocate. Where such places exist, there should be a cautious openness to transfer growth, while remembering that *biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches.*

*We will not allow our callings and kingdom service to be governed by money, time, or pressure to perform to man's expectations.*

70 Internal and external pressures tempt church planters to shortcut the work of God in their lives and in their communities. The desire to produce and the desire to perform applies pressure to church planters. Sometimes external pressures come from coaches, supervisors, local churches, and financial supporters for church planters to measure up to their desires. While accountability is necessary and important, teams must make certain they are not allowing the Spirit's direction to be guided by the aspirations of other well-meaning individuals. Internal pressures also have a tendency to hijack the leadership of the Spirit. Church planters must not give in to the temptations to use the ministry to prove their worth, to gain the respect of others, to accomplish something new, to gain notoriety, or to attempt to emulate another church planter.

Since the Lord is the one who calls missionaries to service (Acts 13:2) and promises to build His church in His way and on His time table (Matt. 16:18), church planters must not allow their callings to be compromised in light of matters related to money or other people's schedules. If God has called a team to a particular people, then His calling is not dictated by the fact that the team's financial support will expire within two years. Supervisors and partnering churches can encourage teams to make plans for the new church to have 200 members within the first two years, but God directs the steps (Prov. 16:9; 20:24).

*We will develop a church planting team before we begin the work.*

Since the biblical model for church planting is a team paradigm, and many liabilities come with a lone ranger approach, church planters must take the time to adequately prepare a team prior to beginning their labors in a particular area. There is strength in numbers. Teams provide accountability, the diversity of gifts and talents, and encouragement whenever the days of difficulty arise.

*We will have a strategy in place for nurturing our families while serving as missionaries.*

Since stress on the family is one of the most critical issues in missionary circles today, church planters must realize this fact and not neglect their families for the sake of the ministry. Just as a team has a strategy in place for the planting of churches, they also need a strategy for developing their families as they journey together in such kingdom service. Paul wrote that new churches were to imitate Him as He imitated Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). Contemporary church planters must also provide such a model before the new churches. Therefore, a healthy family life is a powerful witness to the power of the Gospel.

A church planting family does not have to be next to perfect; *they have to be perfect*. Okay. I will admit this statement is a bit hyperbolic. But the point is if the family falls, then the church planting ministry falls even harder. If the family crumbles, the reverberation will impact the new believers and new churches. If news of a decimated family spreads across those who have recently come in from the harvest fields and the unbelievers in the community, they will begin to question the power of the Gospel to save families. “If this Gospel is not powerful enough to keep the spiritual giants together during difficult times in their marriage,” they will reason, “then how can it help people like us?”

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*We will not neglect our daily devotion time with the Lord by allowing ourselves to be distracted by the numerous needs and tasks to be accomplished in the church planting labors.*

Church planters who are too busy to spend time alone with God each day are church planters who are too busy. The church planting team needs accountability in this area. Numerous examples exist of fallen ministers who can trace the beginnings of their downward spiral to the neglect of their personal devotion times. Ministry in general involves spiritual warfare; but church planters are in the trenches at the front of the battle lines. The opposition is great, and human ingenuity is not sufficient for the tearing down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4). Rather, church planters must spend great amounts of time with the Lord of the harvest, trusting not in their own understanding, but allowing Him to direct their paths (Prov. 3:5–6).

*We will work diligently toward contextualization rather than bringing our preferred traditions to the people.*

Since the work of missionaries involves effective communication, church planters must clearly understand the people to whom they are serving. Proper

contextualization requires not only an excellent understanding of the people geographically, demographically, culturally, spiritually, linguistically, politically, and historically, but also an understanding of the Scriptures and the cultural preferences of the team. While church planters will have preferred ways of doing things, they must be discerning, striving to make certain that their cultural ways of reaching and teaching the new believers do not serve as stumbling blocks to the people coming to Christ. Christ crucified, and not the church planting methods, must be the only foolishness and stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) to the people.

*We will strive to report only those statistics and descriptive details which are truly reflective of what the Holy Spirit is doing in our field.*

72 Since integrity and accuracy are important when reporting about missionary labors, church planters must make certain to report numbers and details which truly reflect what is presently occurring. Bible studies and preaching points should not be reported as churches. Servant activities where the Gospel is not shared should not be called “servant *evangelism* projects.” We deviate from the Kingdom Ethic whenever we report conversions that did not occur and new churches that have not been born. Inaccurate reporting of such matters is equivalent to bearing false witness against the Holy Spirit.

Our reporting of the work of the Spirit should not be limited to numbers alone. This matter is very important in the hard soil areas where church planters are serving. Teams should have the freedom and encouragement to provide a “thick description” of what is presently happening among their people. What events have been happening? How is the Gospel being communicated? Are people making progress in their spiritual journeys to the cross? What questions are the people asking? What are the greatest blessings and challenges the team is experiencing? It is not ethical for supervisors and partnering churches to only be interested in numbers, without consideration for what the Spirit is doing in hearts prior to the birth of churches.

## **conclusion**

It is my hope that this article has caused you to give some thought to the need for church planters to be held to a standard of practice that is biblically grounded and missiologically wise. By developing a set of guidelines for your context, you and your team will be better prepared to remain within the parameters of the Kingdom Ethic as related to missionary activity. For some of you, this article is the start of the conversation regarding church planting and the Kingdom Ethic; for others, the

conversation continues, with this work providing another angle from which to approach the topic. While it is good to discuss such matters, above all else, it is my desire that you will begin to develop and apply ethical guidelines to your church planting ministry.

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Presented to the Southeastern Region Evangelical Missiological Society, Temple Baptist Seminary, Chattanooga, Tennessee April 3–4, 2009.

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