

WHY MULTIPLY HEALTHY CHURCHES?

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Abstract

This article examines biblical motivations to multiply new, healthy churches. Such motivations emerge from the following five biblical truths: a) God the Father seeks and finds the lost, b) The love of Christ obligates us, c) God sent the Holy Spirit for all human beings, d) The local congregation is the primary locus of the rule of the King, and e) Multiplying churches is for the glory of God. Our loving and compassionate triune God desires that all women and men become disciples of Jesus Christ, active participants in a local Christian church, and committed agents of the transformation of their context.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, a large church in Monterrey, Mexico, invited me to give a series of talks on the nature of God. Toward the end of this series of talks, after having concluded one of the papers, a short, elderly, and simply dressed woman came up to me.

“Sir, sir,” she said to me, “I have a question I want to ask you.”

“Yes, of course,” I responded. “What is your question? Was something from the paper not clear?”

Judging from her way of speaking, it seemed to me that this woman was not a member of any evangelical church and was not accustomed to the way Mexican

evangelicals refer to each other as “brother” or “sister.” It also seemed that she did not have a lot of biblical knowledge.

“No, sir, that’s not it,” the woman commented, “there wasn’t anything bad about what you just finished teaching. In fact, you spoke beautifully, very clearly, and you taught us what you think the Bible says about God. This was all very good.

“But sir,” the woman continued, “that’s where my problem is. Years ago, here in Monterrey, we were all Catholic. We all believed what the Catholic church taught us, and we were all in agreement. But now it’s not like that at all. There are so many different churches, so many different preachers on the radio, and so many religious centers! And they all have different opinions—they all teach and say different things about God. And that is my problem.

“I ask myself: of all these people who are talking about God, of all these opinions that we hear, which one is the truth?”

This elderly woman from Monterrey hit the nail on the head. Her question was direct and profound. This is a major problem we are currently facing everywhere in the world. There are thousands of opinions regarding God. Which will be the truth? How can we be sure? Upon which foundations will we build our theology and missiology today? Where this situation affects us most is concerning the topic of multiplying churches in Latin America.

Over a decade ago, in the Preface of David Martin’s book, Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America, Peter Berger, well-known sociologist of religion, commented on the situation today.

This book deals with one of the most extraordinary developments in the world today—the rapid spread of Evangelical Protestantism in vast areas of the underdeveloped societies, notably in Latin America....If one looks at today’s religious scene in an international perspective, there are two truly global movements of enormous vitality. One is conservative Islam, the other conservative Protestantism....The potential impact of (the growth of conservative Protestantism) is likely to be very powerful indeed....The growth of Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America....is the most dramatic case. (David Martin 1990: vii)

In the twenty-first century in Latin America, it is essential that our thinking on multiplying new churches comes from clear motives. Today we are confronted by a complicated and almost contradictory reality regarding this topic. The religiosity of Latin American people is a two-sided coin. On one side, 95% of the Latin American population considers themselves “Christian” in some way. There is a radical difference between the religion of the people and that of the official and formal churches; a small percentage of the population attends church regularly and secularization and nominalism grow every day. Although there is a marked difference from country to country, there is, nonetheless, in almost all of the republics, a general feeling among the people of disillusionment with the institutional church.

Nevertheless, there is another side to this coin. In this new century in Latin America, we find an atmosphere of profound spiritual hunger in which it seems everyone is open to any religious subject—open to try it out and believe all of it. We live in a time of phenomenal changes regarding religious loyalty. We are faced with changes so large and profound that the Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe seems to pale in comparison, even though those Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, and others remain prominent in our minds. As Peter Berger mentioned above, we are navigating a time of great religious revolution in the creation of new religious forms, new church structures, and new spiritual expressions.

Both sides of this religious reality contribute to the creation of an atmosphere of competition and suspicion, which has a profound impact on multiplying new churches. In a place where there has been only one recognized church for centuries, a church that still dominates the religious reality for many republics, what does it mean to multiply new churches? In an atmosphere of such radical religious change and competition for new followers, it is of greatest importance to examine our motives. What will be our motives for multiplying new healthy churches?

This article has to do with the biblical bases and values that motivate us to spend our time and energy in multiplying new, healthy churches, to look for creative ways to do so, and to pay the necessary price. Not only do we want our actions to glorify God, but also our motives. The reason behind multiplying churches is as important as the methods we use in multiplying them. This is especially true in the religious atmosphere we find today in Latin America. In the end, as we will see later, the task of multiplying churches is not our own; it is God's. It is because of this that our motives must bring glory to our God.

Knowing this, it is perhaps important to examine our hearts and highlight some of our motives that might not be in line with the heart of God. In order to save space, these motives are presented in list form. The reader is invited to reflect on the following motives that are not consistent with the love of Christ. Why multiply healthy churches?

- NOT to extend the small kingdom, domain, or influence of our own denomination, mission organization, church, or pastor. In all of these cases, we are only establishing new branches of a religious corporation, not multiplying the Church of Jesus Christ.
- NOT because all the other churches in our city or nation are not truly Christ's churches. In this case, we see ourselves as forced to prove that only we have the truth, and all others are wrong before God. This kind of thinking means that our negative motivation focuses on other churches in place of positively pointing to Christ, the Head of the church. On the contrary, Jesus invites us to examine the plank in our own eye before we try to remove the speck from our neighbor's eye (Mt. 7:3–5).

- NOT because we want to forcefully impose one way of religiosity for all people. This type of church “multiplying” has already been tried in Latin America in the Colonial era with disastrous results. On the contrary, the Bible calls us to extend an open, loving, tender, and gentle invitation to all who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would come to confess their faith in Jesus Christ and based on this faith, become members of Christ’s church.¹
- NOT because we are in a competition for more converts over other churches, as if multiplying churches were a soccer championship. If our motivation is competition, what we would be doing is “recycling of the saints” or “stealing sheep.” This is not God’s mission.
- NOT because we want to manipulate the people of God in such a way that they would follow us so that we could gain a lot of money and prestige in our community and nation.
- NOT because multiplying churches gives us pride or recognition, making us great or famous. Although we do know that some church leaders have psychological leanings in this direction, it is imperative that we acknowledge this predisposition and “offer (our) bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,” so that our activities in multiplying new, healthy churches can be our “true and proper worship,” our offering to God (Romans 12:1).

¹ With regard to this wrong motive, I am beginning to see that in Latin America we should avoid using the word “plant” to refer to starting new churches. Latin American evangelicals have borrowed this word from English language usage where it has been used for the last forty years in reference to starting new congregations and churches in North America. However, in the context of Latin America, the word “plant” has certain historical roots and makes one think of the Spanish and Portuguese conquests during which churches were “planted” in a mostly brusque, forced, conquering, and destructive manner. I was born in Mexico City and raised in San Cristobal de Las Casas in the state of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. In both of these places, the history of the Spanish conquest includes the killing of thousands and thousands of people from pre-Columbian cultures, all in the name of “planting” churches. This is a sad and disheartening history of the imposition of forms of “Christianity” in ways not consistent with a biblical understanding of mission. This same story was repeated in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. There have also been situations in some aspects of Protestant missionary work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where the imposition of foreign religious practices is alarmingly similar to the European conquest of the sixteenth century. Perhaps, in reference to our evangelization and mission in Latin America, we should use the word “multiply” with more of a sense of humility and hope. On the other hand, if we use the word “plant,” perhaps we need to conceptualize that as one who places a small seed in the ground and hopes the seed will die and that God would bring it to new life such that, with time, it may yield a harvest. (For example, see Mark 4:26–29; John 4:36–37; 1 Cor. 3:6; 15:36–37).

If we reject the motives that honor neither our Savior Jesus Christ nor the Holy Spirit, we then must focus on finding true and biblical motives that will lead us to multiply new, healthy churches. Biblical motivations for multiplying new, healthy churches need to be based on a Trinitarian misiology (See Ajith Fernando 2000). Because of this, I submit that the Bible presents us with at least the following five reasons why we should multiply new churches:

- A. Because God the Father seeks and finds the lost;
- B. Because the love of Christ obligates us;
- C. Because the Holy Spirit has been sent for all human beings (all flesh);
- D. Because the local congregation is the primary locus of the kingdom of God, the rule of the King;
- E. Because multiplying churches is for the praise of the glory of God.

THESIS

This article's main idea is that the biblical motivation for multiplying healthy churches resides in the loving and compassionate mission of the triune God (missio Dei), who desires for all men and women to be disciples of Jesus Christ and to be responsible members of a church, the body of Christ. As such, these congregations are witnesses to the coming reign of God for the honor and glory of God.

MAIN POINTS

In this article, there is only enough space to present the biblical foundation in a rather broad outline. This is presented here with the hope that this review will challenge the reader to study his/her Bible in a new way, allowing it to answer the question, "Why does God want us to multiply new, healthy churches in Latin America and around the world?" The first reason is found in the nature and will of God.

A. Because God the Father Seeks and Finds the Lost

The first biblical foundation for multiplying new, healthy churches is the most basic of all of them. It stems from the nature of God. Every effort within missions, including multiplying new churches, comes from and flows out of the will of God (*missio Dei*) who loved the world so much "he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Hendrikus Berkhof affirms that the most basic attribute of God is that he is a God who reveals himself to us (See H. Berkhof 1979:41–65). In 1 John 4:8 we read that God is *agape*, love that is self-giving. God is always the one who initiates the search to reach humans, looking to draw them in and receive them within a covenant relationship. "I will be your God, you will

be my people, and I will dwell in your midst” is the fundamental biblical affirmation of the will of God. (See C. Van Engen 1996:71–89).

The God of the Bible is neither the Unmovable Mover nor the Original Cause of the European Enlightenment of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The God of the Bible is not the god of the deists, a god who supposedly put the “laws of nature” into place and then removed himself in order to let “nature” govern the world. The God of the Bible is not merely the God of the “Omni’s” (omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, etc.) as, for example, he is described in the Westminster Confession, although these are included in God’s characteristics. The God of the Bible is not just the creation of our own subjective experience as Schleiermacher presented; nor is God only part of categories of the mind as Emmanuel Kant expressed. The God of the Bible is neither an immanent God, nor a product of cultural world-and-life-views, nor the product of a psychological hunger for meaning. He is also not the pure object of human religious searching.

On the contrary, the God of the Bible is loving, compassionate, slow to anger, benevolent, and full of mercy, who constantly and always desires to share his grace and love with humans and to enter into covenant with them. The Bible presents us with a God who is actively involved in his creation, who reveals himself to humanity, who responds, even emotionally, to the human rejection of his love, and who—in Jesus Christ—preserves and sustains his creation, as Paul says in the high Christology of Colossians 1. What follows will be an outline of the biblical texts that speak to the missionary nature of the God of the Bible.

1. God Created and Cares for All Human Beings, Even in Spite of the Fact That Humanity Rejects God.

- All human beings share the same origin in their creation by the God of the universe. (Gen 1–3; Job 38–42; Isa 41–46; Jonah; John 1; Acts 17:16–31; Rom 1; Ps 64:9; 65; 66:1, 4, 8; 67:3–5; 2 Pet 3:8–13; Rev 21:1). As such, all people have common ancestors in Adam and Eve (Gen 1–5).
- All humanity is judged in the Flood. Noah and his family are the ancestors of all people, and God established a covenant with all people, as evidenced by the rainbow (Gen 6:10).
- The “Table of the Nations” presents the idea that all people are descendants of the same race (Gen 10:5, 6, 20, 31, 32).
- The Tower of Babel affirms that all human beings have common ancestors in terms of language (Gen 11:1–9). Here we see different people groups within the universal love of God, a concept that is reaffirmed in the genealogy of Shem and Terah.
- God is the King of all the earth, Creator, Ruler, the “King of Glory” (2 Sam 15:10; 2 Kings 9:13; Isa 52:7; Ps 32; 47:8. See, for example, Jer 17:12 and the Christology of Eph 1, Col 1; Phil 2; Rev 4:9, 10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4).

The God of the Bible always takes the first step. He initiates the search and invites all humanity into a new relationship with him through reconciliation. This God has created and continues creating human beings with the intent that they would be in constant communion with him. With his own hands, the God of creation formed human beings out of mud. Having breathed life into that lump of clay (Gen 2:7), he took it and lovingly, joyfully, and carefully formed humanity in the image of God—*imago Dei* (Gen 2:20–25). This is the God of the Bible who, after Adam and Eve sinned against him and hid themselves from his face, cried out in pain and anguish, “Adam, Adam, where are you?” This God of the Bible is the God who saved Noah and his family and promised to never destroy all people again (Gen 6–9).

As children of this creating and sustaining God, we must also learn to care for creation over which we have been given dominion. We must make the effort to affirm the value of human life and to safeguard it as much as possible. Concerning multiplying healthy churches, this first truth suggests that we work so that every human being might come to know his creator. We invite all human beings, by faith in Jesus Christ, to join with us in praising and glorifying our Creator. In such way, members of our congregations can participate in God’s work of caring for creation and the life of each human being, thus transforming the reality in which they live (See Ray Bakke 2000 and C. Rene Padilla and Tetsunao Yamamori, eds. 2003).

2. *God is a God of Love and Mercy.*

Time after time, the Bible affirms that God is loving and merciful. This triune God of the Bible, as mentioned earlier, is love (*agape*), one who reveals himself to his people. Moses found himself in the presence of God after he left Egypt. About that encounter, the Bible tells us the following: “And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents ...’” (Ex 34:6–7) This description of God’s being is repeated innumerable times in the Bible. See, for example, Ex 22:27; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9–10; 7:9–10; 2 Chron 30:9; Neh 9:17; Ps 51:1; 86:5, 15; 103:8, 11:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18; James 5:11.

The God of the Bible is the God of love from the Psalms. Multitudes of Psalms speak of God’s love, mercy, and care. For example, Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing...”

In Isaiah 6, one finds the call of the prophet Isaiah. He is in the temple and encounters the missionary God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this encounter with the presence of God, all five of Isaiah’s senses were engaged—he saw God high and lifted up, he heard the seraphim praising God, he felt the building shake, he smelled the smoke fill the temple, and he tasted the coal of God’s forgiveness with which the seraphim touched his

lips. The primary importance of this encounter is not limited to the relationship between Isaiah and his God. Additionally, there is a missionary element to it. The God of love and mercy cries out, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (Isa 6:8). This calling, Isaiah’s vocation, is centered on this missionary. God desires to send Isaiah as his messenger to Israel and to all the nations. The moment will come when Isaiah will declare the following about Israel and the coming Messiah, words that much later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus of Nazareth spoke concerning his mission.

This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens... “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” (Isa 42:5–7, compare with Isa 49:6; 61:1–3; Luke 2:32; 4:18–19).

The messianic and missional prophecies in Isaiah form part of the background for the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The main emphasis of Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55 is God’s loving and merciful nature towards Israel and all other nations.

Jesus stresses that this love is an attribute of his heavenly Father, as well, who because of love, seeks to be in relationship with his people. Jesus said to Nicodemus the Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin (a council of seventy people who governed the people of Israel during Jesus’ time), and leader of the Jews, “For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” In his teaching, Jesus again stressed God’s loving nature. Another example of this is in the parable of the Tenants in Luke 20:9–17. God, represented as the owner of the vineyard, constantly tries to enter into a relationship with his workers (compare with Isaiah 5). Additionally, in the parable of the Great Banquet, God, who is characterized by the host of the dinner, sends his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame... Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full” (Luke 14:15–24; Mt 22:1–ff). In chapter 15 of his book, Luke combines three parables that show us how this God loves, seeks, and finds the lost. This God, as a shepherd does, looks for and finds his lost sheep. He is like a woman who looks for and finds her lost coin. He is also like a father who anxiously waits for the day when his lost son will return home. Upon finding the lost, the God of the Bible throws a party with his angels and joyfully celebrates that the lost have been found. Concerning this point, the reader should note that in these parables, the idea of being “lost” has to do with a break in a close relationship with God—with the shepherd on behalf of the sheep, with the woman on behalf of the coin, and with the father on behalf of the prodigal son.

In regard to this God of love, Paul asks, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, gra-

ciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). Peter also affirms that God is a God of love and mercy, and “he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). In his first letter, John affirms this most basic characteristic of God as well—“God is love” (1 John 4:8). Additionally, in Revelation, we see that this God of love will bring people from every tribe, language, people, and nation together around the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 15:4; 21:24; 22:2).

In Christ, we have become children of this loving and merciful father (John 1:12). Therefore, as his children, we must be involved and challenged to participate with our loving Father in the search and rescue of the lost. It is not possible to be sons and daughters of this loving God and refuse to participate in this search for the lost. Additionally, when we as sons and daughters of God come together to worship this God of love, we are incomplete because we are missing those who have not yet come to know our loving and merciful father. Each time we come together to worship God is a challenge and call to invite others to join with us in praise to our God who loves all humanity.

3. God Chooses His People to Be His Instruments of Love in the Search among the Nations

God is the God of particular people and at the same time is the God OF ALL NATIONS. In the Bible, the word “nations” does not refer to a modern political entity like Mexico, for example. It refers to a particular group of people connected by language, culture, ancestry, and history. In the Old Testament, the term “nations” speaks to the ethnic entities, people, and cultural groups of Israel’s immediate environment. Israel is the “*am*,” the people of God, and “the nations” are the “*goyim*,” all the other people groups who are not part of God’s “*am*.” Beginning with the call of Abraham, the Bible is clear that Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, the people of God, exist in order to be God’s instrument of love among the nations.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob heard the cry of his people in Egypt and used Moses and his creation to bring about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. This deliverance had two interrelated purposes. The first purpose was so that the people of Israel would come to know God in a new way and would worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Mt. Sinai (Ex 6:2–7; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 8; 14:31; 20:2). However, this was only part of what God wanted to teach his people through their deliverance from Egypt. His plan is much bigger, deeper, and more profound. Through the Exodus, God wanted all of Egypt and their surrounding “nations” to come to know that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the only true God and created and sustains all of life of earth (Ex 5:2; 7:5; 17; 8:10; 9:14, 16; 10:2; 14:4, 18, 31). God’s use of his people as his instruments among the nations is so important that, centuries later, Paul cites one of these passages in his own description of the mission of God’s love. During

the Exodus, God used Moses to say to Pharaoh, “But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Ex 9:16; Rom 9:17).

What follows is an outline of some of the texts that show the love of God and his desire to bring this love to “the nations.”

- a. God gives specific commandments regarding the special care that Israel must offer to “the stranger that is among you” (Gen 12:10; 20:1; 21:34; 47:4; Ex 20:10; 22:21; Lev 18:26; 20:2; 25:40; Num 15:14–16; Deut 10:18–19; 26:5–11; I Kings 8:27, 41–43; II Chron 6:18, 32—The dedication of Solomon’s Temple)
- b. The “nations” play an important role in God’s activity (Deut 26:19; I Chron 16:8, 31; Psa 9:1, 19–20; 47:1, 7–9; 64:9; 65; 66:1, 4, 8; 67:1–5; 72:17–18; 96:1–3, 7, 10, 13; 97:5–6; 98:2–3, 9; 102:13–15; 108:3; 113:4; Is 2:2–4, 40:5, 17; 49:5–6; 52:15; 55:4–5; 56:6–7; 60:3, 11; 62:2; 66:2; 66:19–20; Jer 4:2; Zeph 2:11–13; Amos, Jonah, Micah 1:1–7; 4:1–5).
- c. The Old Testament and Jesus mention the “house of prayer for all the nations.” Solomon’s temple was a special place for prayer for the “stranger” (2 Chron 6:32–33; Micah 4:1–2; Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11; Matt 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46; Matt 25:32. Compare with Acts 14:15–17).
- d. God chose Israel to “be among the nations” as his instrument of love for all people (Ex 6:6–8; 19:5–6; Deut 4:20; 7:6; 14:2; 26:1; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 2:9–10). In his conversation with Nicodemus (John 3) and in the declaration of his messianic mission (Luke 4:18–19), Jesus mentions God’s intention for his people. See also the following related passages: Isa 35:4–8; 61:1; Heb 1:9; Psa 45:7; Matt 11:1–6, John the Baptist; Psa 145:14–ff; Luke 1:46–55; I Sam 2:1–10; Matt 25:31–ff; Acts 2:42–47.
- e. Paul understood the universal mission of God in such a way that he considered himself a debtor to all people (Rom 1:14) and was committed to participating in the “mystery of Christ” (Eph 2:11–3:21).
- f. The people of God are a sign of the universal love of God that he has for all nations (Isa 11:12; 49:22; 62:10; Matt 5; John 3:14, 15; 12:32; Rom 1:14).
- g. The covenant that God makes with his people has within it the purpose of reaching out to the nations who do not already know their Creator. Emilio Nuñez, focusing on the covenant with Noah, helps us understand this missionary element of God’s covenant. Nuñez explains the following:

For the purpose of our missiological reflection, what we want to emphasize the most from God’s covenant with Noah and other unconditional covenants that Yahweh establishes with humans is the divine interest in the salvation of all human

beings. This salvation is not limited to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. It also had to do with the spiritual (*shalom*) and physical well being of human beings. The promise covers everything from the animal kingdom (Gen 9:8–17) to the plant world (Gen 8:22–9:3). God has made a covenant with “the earth” (Gen 9:13). This blessing is also ecological. “As long as the earth endures seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Gen 8:22). The effects of the covenant are cosmic, as a blessing for all humanity...

Ezekiel 1:28 and Revelation 4:3 mention the rainbow as a symbol of God’s majesty. The rainbow becomes an apocalyptic sign and symbol for humanity. Judgment day is coming...

God does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). He wants the biblical stories of the flood with the rainbow in the clouds to be a powerful incentive for all human beings to repent and believe in Christ for their salvation...

Every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper, in communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we remember the blood that was shed as a seal of this new covenant (Matt 26:26–29), taking on the sins of the world (1 John 2:2), as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28; 1 Peter 1:18–19) and in order to reconcile the world with God (2 Cor 5:18–21 Ephesians 2:16; Col 1:20–21). We should remember that the blood of the Lamb was poured out to “take away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) We must also remember that, in obedience to God, the Church must continue to come around the table of communion “until he comes again.” In other words, until the Son of David returns to reign over all the earth...

God’s covenant with Noah and those established with the people of Israel, attest to the divine interest in the salvation of all people. The covenants in the Old Testament provide a solid base to the universal Christian mission. They also serve as a foundation for the concept of holistic missions because the promises of the covenants include the spiritual as well as the material. They offer blessings for all human beings. (Emilio A. Nuñez 1997, 181–182, 214. Translation by editors of this volume).

The reality of God’s love for all people, as written above, shows us that all believers in Christ must by definition be involved in the search for the lost because of God’s nature. In other words, to be children of God means that we must multiply new, healthy churches. Our heavenly Father seeks out the lost, and as his children, we must do the same.

Those of us who have known Christ for some time and are members of an evangelical church probably know the above truths in our heads, but too often, we fail to live them out. The fundamental basis for multiplying new, healthy churches lies in the nature of God, a loving, merciful God who reveals God's self to humans and looks to be in covenant relationship with them. Because of this, multiplying churches is not optional. On the contrary, it is part of the essential nature of our faith. If we are children of this God, we must then do all that is possible in seeking, finding, receiving, and incorporating all human beings into the community of faith, so that they can be reconciled with God (2 Cor 5). A biblical missiology recognizes that ultimately our motivation for multiplying new, healthy churches does not merely stem from the nature of the church but flows from the will of God.

In the footnote below the reader will find a short list of supporting works that emphasize a similar perspective of a God who, because of his love and mercy, seeks and finds the lost.²

B. Because the Love of Christ Compels Us

How God shows his love and mercy through seeking and saving the lost is the foundation for the mission of Jesus Christ, for the sending of the Holy Spirit, and for the Church's call to announce the Good News of God's reign to the whole world, bringing honor and glory to God. Therefore, in this second part, we will briefly examine the mission of Jesus Christ as one of the main motivations to multiplying new, healthy churches.

1. The Incarnation

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The love of God does not remain in theory or in speculation. On the contrary, God, because of his great love, became flesh. “He came to that which was his own...” (John 1:11). In Jesus, the Christ (the Messiah) God became human, flesh and bone, culturally a Jew, a man

² Karl Barth 1961; Johannes Blauw 1962; Richard de Ridder 1975; John Fuellenback 1995; Arthur Glasser, with Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland and Shawn B. Redford 2003; Ken R. Gnanakan 1993; Roger Hedlund 1985; Walter C. Kaiser, 2000; Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. 1985; George E. Ladd 1959; Helen Barrett Montgomery 1920; Johannes Nissen 1999; Emilio A. Nuñez 1997; C. René Padilla 1998; Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller 1983; Norman Snaith 1944; John Stott 1981; Valdir R. Steuernagel 1991; Mark Strom 1990; Charles Van Engen, Dean Gilliland and Paul Pierson, eds. 1993; Gailyn Van Rheenen 1983; Gerhard von Rad 1962; and George Ernest Wright 1955, 1961.

who lived in Palestine during the first century AD, under the rule of Caesar Augustus, while “Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:2). God did not come in an abstract or purely mystical way. He came to be in relationship with human beings in concrete situations, in a visible and identifiable reality.

As with Jesus and his disciples, “the love of Christ compels us” to make the love of God visible through our interactions with all people. “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” Therefore, as a new creation, we cry out to all people throughout the world: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:14–20).

Just as God became flesh to dwell among humanity, Christ’s disciples are part of communities, towns, and cities. Because of this, multiplying new, healthy churches guarantees that the Good News is born out of and grows in concrete places, particular cultures, and among specific people. In reality, these new, healthy congregations are the ambassadors of the presence and grace of God. Through these groups of Christ’s followers, God invites everyone who comes to them to be reconciled with God.

During his ministry, Jesus had a number of followers (maybe even up to 120) who walked with him during the three years of his ministry. They walked together, ate together, prayed together, laughed together, cried together. That group of disciples was the first congregation of the New Testament. Moreover, just as the first group of Jesus’ followers was the first congregation of the New Testament, Jesus’ followers today make up a new congregation. As people become disciples of Jesus Christ, new congregations are born. The people who make up these groups are made of flesh and bone, influenced by their culture and context.

Multiplying new, healthy churches is the fruit of missionary activity that flows out of the nature of the church. Christ’s love compels us to proclaim the salvation that he offers. When people decide to follow Christ and come together in his name, a new congregation is born. Even more, Jesus promises, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:20). Jesus promises to be present (through the Holy Spirit) in those moments and places wherever his followers come together in his name. Even more, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). In other words, when Jesus’ disciples come together in his name and when they love each other, Jesus and God the Father are present through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Why must we multiply new, healthy churches? Christ’s love always is shown in a concrete way when his disciples come together in his name, in an atmosphere of love. This occurs in specific places—the countryside, a vil-

lage, between people of flesh and bone, who have their own particular language and culture. In these places, “Christ’s love compels us” to invite those around us to become disciples of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

2. *Contextualization*

When Jesus’ disciples come together, they gather in an atmosphere where he is present. In this atmosphere, the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes natural to the cultural context of the church. The genius behind multiplying new, healthy churches is that they come from the people and reflect the culture in which they have been multiplied. In his ministry, Jesus responded differently to each person with whom He interacted. He offered living water to the Samaritan Woman. He gave food to hungry crowds. For Mary and Martha, he gave them life in bringing back Lazarus, their brother, from the dead. In Jesus’ ministry, his gifts were tailored for those who were receiving them. As such, each congregation should not just reflect their denomination, mission organization, or mother church. They must also reflect the culture in which they have been multiplied in terms of economy, language, and world-and-life view. Healthy congregations must reflect the culture of their surrounding contexts. In other words, they must not be like a foreign bush planted among native shrubs. Instead, they must be planted in their native soil where they can grow well. For more than one hundred years, missiologists have followed this concept, drawing from the thinking of Roland Allen, John Nevius, Mel Hodges, John A. Mackay, Orlando Costas, Rubén Tito Paredes, and others. The local congregation is where the gospel becomes contextualized.

3. *The Calling into Mission*

A healthy congregation is not just made up of followers of Christ who come together to think only about themselves. A congregation will not be healthy and mature if it does not reach outside of its surrounding culture. True followers of Jesus try to make new followers of Christ. One can clearly see this call in chapters 9 and 10 of Luke, in addition to the five Great Commissions (Matt 28:18–20—compare with Matt 10:5–15; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–49—Acts 1:8; John 15:12–17 with 21:15–17).³

³ Most missiologists write about a biblical basis for starting new churches by drawing from the Great Commission. In many of these cases, the authors pay little attention or put little effort into examining the hermeneutics behind, and the significance of, the Great Commission as it relates to the mission of God throughout the entire Bible. See, for example, Robert Logan 1989: 190–192; Robert Logan 2002: 15, 9; Aubrey Malphurs 1992: 119–123; Marlin Nelson 2001: 39–47; Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter 2003: 11–25; C. Peter Wagner 1990: 19; and C. Peter Wagner 1980: 44–46.

Biblically speaking, making new disciples has never been merely an individual pursuit, but rather a collective activity. Since the birth of the church in Acts, one can see that the disciples of Christ, by the fact of being his followers, came together with other disciples in collective congregations. As we saw before, Jesus says, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name...” Exercising one’s Christian faith always happens collectively.

A missionary Christology does not separate Christ’s personhood from his actions, his humanity from his divinity, nor does it separate the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ of faith.” On the contrary, it emphasizes Jesus’ missionary ministry as one who was sent from the Father to save the world. This holistic ministry includes his offices (prophet, priest, king) and his ministry as Savior, Liberator, and sage. Jesus transfers his mission to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Jesus’ mission and ministry are the basis for the calling and commitment of Christ’s followers.

In his first sermon in Acts, Paul says, “For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13:47; compare with Luke 2:32, with reference to Jesus). Jesus transfers his offices, his ministry, and his mission to his disciples who, together, make up the body of Christ, the physical presence of Christ in the world. It is in this way that we, as Christ’s disciples, come to be prophets, priests, kings, healers, liberators, and sages in mission. The local congregation as the body of Christ exists to put into action the mission and ministry of Jesus in the world. Fundamentally speaking, the local congregation exists to invite other people—all human beings—to be disciples of Jesus Christ, just as it is seen in the message of the book of Acts (See C. Van Engen 1991, 119–130).

Missiologists with a missionary mindset recognize that salvation is neither found in participating in church activities nor in simply being a member of a church. In this sense, our calling is not to simply “multiply” churches. At its most basic, our calling is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. In other words, multiplying new, healthy churches is making new groups of people who participate in Christ’s mission by being his disciples.

Our message is not the superiority of our church or its creeds and confessions. Additionally, we do not exist to simply be instruments of socio-economic or political change. Our message is simply and only Jesus Christ who lived, was crucified, and “rose again from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty where he will come to judge the living and the dead,” as the Apostles’ Creed states.

In Revelation, John sees the future, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They

were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev 7:9–10; see also 5:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). This vision fulfills the promise that John had previously heard from Jesus when Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). The local congregation is a sign and a symbol, a representation of that multitude around the throne of God, the Lamb. As we wait for the fulfillment of this time, during this time between the times of his first and second comings, Jesus and our heavenly Father has sent us the Holy Spirit to build his church.

C. Because the Holy Spirit was Sent to All People and to Build the Church

The third fundamental reason for multiplying healthy churches is because this action is the work of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, we are not the ones who multiply churches. You and I do not grow the church. The church exists only because of the work of the Holy Spirit. There are three aspects to this truth.

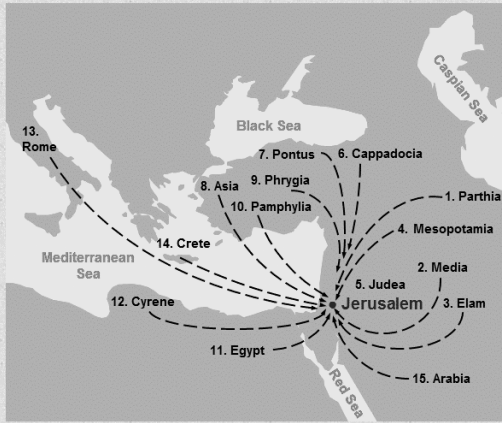
1. The Holy Spirit Was Given for All People

God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit out of their desire that no one be lost and that all might be saved. In Acts 2, Luke narrates the events of the first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to Jesus’ disciples “who were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). They formed a new local congregation. The Holy Spirit was sent in the form of fire and wind and the disciples “began to speak in other tongues” (Acts 2:4). Luke explains through Peter’s words, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (Acts 2:17). Luke offers us a list of the places where people were able to hear in their own language Peter’s sermon, in order to emphasize the fact that the Holy Spirit was sent for all people (Acts 2:8). In the map below, the reader can appreciate Luke’s genius in providing us a list of the main cultures and nations surrounding Jerusalem during this time. People from these places heard the gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language. This was a miracle of the ear and was through the special work of the Holy Spirit.

THE “TABLE OF NATIONS” IN ACTS

In Acts 2:9–11, Luke mentions fifteen places of origin for those who heard Peter’s sermon on Pentecost. This “Table of Nations” in Acts echoes that of Genesis 10. In chapter 2, Luke seems to indicate that the confusion of tongues from Babel has been transformed and healed at Pentecost. The people present at Pentecost mainly came from the provinces of Asia (of the

The New Testament "Table of Nations" at Pentecost



There are 15 locations listed in Acts 2:9-11. This "Table of Nations" is an echo of the "Table of Nations" found Genesis 10.

In Acts 2, Luke seems to hint about a reversing of the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel. The people at Pentecost come primarily from provinces in Asia (the Roman Empire) and Media (the Parthian Empire) as well as Crete and Rome.

Provinces of the Roman Empire	Cities of the Roman Empire	Provinces of the Parthian Empire
5. Judea	Jerusalem	1. Parthia
6. Cappadocia	13. Rome	2. Media
7. Pontus		3. Elam
8. Asia		4. Mesopotamia
9. Phrygia		
10. Pamphylia		
11. Egypt		
12. Cyrene		
14. Crete		
15. Arabia		

Roman Empire) and from the empire of the Medes and Persians, as well as from Crete and Rome (see the map below). All of these people heard the gospel in their own language.

Why multiply new, healthy churches? Through new congregations, the Holy Spirit wants to continue transforming the lives of all people. It is interesting that in Acts, Luke tells us four more times, in four different places, representing four different cultures, when the Holy Spirit comes in a form identical to that of Pentecost in Acts 2. [See chapter 4 (Judea); chapter 8 (Samaria); chapter 10 (Cornelius, a Gentile convert to Judaism, who feared God); and chapter 19 (the Gentiles of Ephesians, "to the ends of the earth").] The Holy Spirit wants to multiply new, healthy, local congregations made up of women and men who represent "all people." It is clear from Acts that in order to reach this goal, the Holy Spirit uses the Christ followers from local churches to multiply new, healthy churches. This process is the norm of the New Testament.

2. The Holy Spirit Builds New Healthy Congregations

In the end, we need to recognize that as humans, we are not the ones who build the church. In reality, we are also not the ones who multiply new, local congregations. This work begins with the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts

clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the growth, health, and development of a church. In Acts, we see that the Holy Spirit does the following as well:

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Builds the church.

Reforms and transforms the church.

Gives power to the church.

Unifies the church.

Gives new knowledge and illumination to the words of Jesus.

Sends the church out.

Creates within the church a desire to grow.

Accompanies the church on its mission.

Guides the church.

Prays through the church and intercedes for the church.

Gives the church the words for testimony and proclamation.

Facilitates communication.

Develops and facilitates in the receptivity of the listeners.

Convinces people of their sin, of justice, and of judgment.

Converts people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Brings together and unifies Christians so that together they can be the church.

Receives new believers.

Sends the church out into the world that God loves so much...

One of the Holy Spirit's most profound desires is to grow the church. Even the best strategies cannot make the church grow. The church is the "mysterious creation of God" (in the words of Karl Barth) and exists through the work of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, we know this truth, but often we forget it. Perhaps we forget the Holy Spirit's role because the Holy Spirit rarely works alone. The Holy Spirit enjoys using human instruments, Jesus' disciples, to accomplish the work of creating new, healthy churches.

This desire of the Holy Spirit is evident throughout Acts and the New Testament. It is emphasized in a notable way in Acts 13. After giving us a list of the church leaders in Antioch, Luke tells us that it was the Holy Spirit who said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). The rest of the book is the story of how the Holy Spirit used Paul, Barnabas, and many others in multiplying new, healthy churches in the different places Luke mentions in the second chapter. Accordingly, every congregation throughout the world must listen to the call of the Holy Spirit to be agents of the triune God in multiplying new, healthy churches. All healthy churches should be concerned about, and actively involved in, multiplying new churches through the power of the Holy Spirit.

3. *The Holy Spirit Gives Gifts to and Sends Out the Members of the Church So That They Will Multiply New Congregations.*

In order to carry out this multiplying, the Holy Spirit gives gifts to believers of Christ as a means of special grace. Surely, the reader is familiar with the New Testament passages that mention the different gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the members of the body of Christ. (See Rom 12: 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; 1 Pet 4:10–11.) One could say that the Holy Spirit is like the central nervous system of the body. Just like one cable produces electricity and one nerve produces an electrical impulse to the brain, so the Holy Spirit carries the commands from the Head of the church (Christ) to the members of the body and moves the muscles to action. That is, the Holy Spirit moves the members of the body of Christ in their mission in the world. It is not possible to multiply new, healthy churches without the careful and efficient use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

A careful study of Ephesians 4 shows that the gifts of the Spirit are given with two complementary purposes. On the one hand, the gifts are used for the development and maturity of the members of the church. However, the work of the Holy Spirit does not stop here. The members' development and maturity has a purpose beyond the confines of the church. They are given for mission in the world. In Ephesians 4:12, Paul says that the gifts have been given "to equip his people *for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*" The word Paul uses here, translated into English as "service," is *diakonia*. This word, from where we get our word "deacon," is a key word that Paul frequently uses as a synonym for *the mission of God*. For example, see Ephesians 3:1–7 where Paul says that he became a servant [deacon] of the "mystery" (Eph 3:7) that the Gentiles are "heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The gifts are activities of ministry that are practiced as much outside as inside the church-in-the-world in order to bring to Christ those who do not yet know him as their Savior. When these gifts are carried out in this way, the church is "built up," that is, it grows in a holistic way—organically, spiritually, socially, and numerically (See Orlando Costas 1975; 1974; 1979). The gifts of the Spirit are missionary gifts that the Spirit wants to use to touch the lives of those who are not yet disciples of Christ, in order to transform them and bring them into the church of Christ, creating new, healthy congregations.

Because these gifts are given directly from the Holy Spirit, they must only be used in an atmosphere drenched in the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc. (Gal 5:22–23; Eph 4:1–6). When these gifts are used biblically, the anticipated result is that new people will come to Christ and new, healthy churches will develop. The Holy Spirit does not give these gifts just to grow already established churches. Biblical growth

results in the multiplication of believers and of new, healthy, congregations. Biblical growth should also result in the transformation of the society and culture of the neighborhoods surrounding these new congregations.

Currently, too many mega-churches around the world have not given birth to new congregations. It seems as if they want to hoard God's grace all for themselves and not share it with "all people." A healthy church looks to reproduce itself, multiplying new, congregations locally, regionally, and globally. A healthy church participates in the mission of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In this missionary activity, by the work of the Holy Spirit, a healthy church will multiply other new, healthy churches.

D. Because the Local Congregation is the Primary Agent of the Kingdom of God

The exposition on the work of the Holy Spirit above drives us to consider the fourth fundamental reason why new and healthy churches should be multiplied. This fourth reason has much to do with the nature of the church and its relationship with the kingdom of God. I want to suggest here that it is a natural and essential aspect of the very nature of the church for it to reproduce itself into new congregations.⁴ This is something that may be expected of every healthy congregation. We could also say it negatively—something is wrong with a local congregation that does not reproduce itself. We can think about this from three points of view.

1. The Description of Healthy Congregations in Acts 2 and I Thessalonians 1

We first must consider what the Bible teaches us about the nature of a healthy congregation. When we multiply new and healthy churches, what are we multiplying? That answer may be found in Acts 2 and I Thessalonians 1. In each passage, we find a description of a new congregation less than a year old. Luke explains the characteristics of the congregation in Acts 2:43–47 with the purpose of proving that it is made up of messianic Jews who faithfully follow the Old Testament commandments and are also faithful followers of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. In the case of the believers of Thessalonica, Paul mentions the characteristics of that church in order to prove that "he has chosen you" (I Thess. 1:4). How can one know that the believers of Thessalonica are chosen? It is known because they manifest the following characteristics.

⁴ One of the best resources I have encountered concerning the development of the biblical basis for multiplying healthy churches is the work of Fernando Mora, a pastor and biochemical engineer in Caracas, Venezuela. See Fernando Mora 2000, chapter 3. This book is self-published and may be found by contacting Fernando at: fmorac@cantv.net. Also, consider the work of Stuart Murray 1998, 36–65.

Given the biblical context in which these characteristics appear, I believe that Luke, like Paul, offers us not only a description of a particular group of believers (written only in descriptive form), but he also is giving a summary of what he believes constitutes a true and authentic local church (written in normative form). In other words, our congregations and new, healthy churches should demonstrate the following characteristics:

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH REVEALED IN ACTS 2:43–47

1. There are miracles and extraordinary signs.
2. The congregation has an impact in its surrounding context.
3. The members of the congregation have everything in common. They care for one another.
4. They eat together and celebrate Communion and special unity.
5. They praise and worship God.
6. The Lord adds to their number each day those who have been chosen for salvation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH REVEALED IN
I THESSALONIANS 1:2–10

1. They confess Jesus as their Savior
2. The gospel arrives with power. There are miracles and special signs.
3. The Word is preached.
4. They experience a communion of love.
5. They express an exemplary form of living.
6. They suffer on behalf of the gospel.
7. They show a spiritual joy.
8. They show radical conversion.
9. Their witness is known throughout the world.
10. They demonstrate a new hope.

Much could be said concerning these descriptions of healthy churches. However, here I only want to mention one aspect. Both of these new churches are committed to evangelization, to mission, and to the numerical growth of believers and congregations. There are occasions when we wish to emphasize one or two of these characteristics mentioned in the two passages. However, these characteristics describe a reality understood when all are considered together. It is not possible to accept or emphasize one or two of these characteristics and pass over the rest. To do so would be to ignore the form in which Luke and Paul describe these two congregations. The description of each one is a complete package, both organic and holistic. To emphasize unity, worship, or signs and wonders means that one must also stress the missionary work of these congregations in announcing the gospel, the way they bring forth the numerical growth of believers, and their attempts to multiply new and healthy churches. (See Charles Van Engen 1981: 178–190.)

2. *The Relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God*⁵

The local congregation, as the missionary people of God, is an instrument of the kingdom of God, the principal agent of the kingdom of God, a sign of the kingdom, and the principal environment where the kingdom is made known.⁶ A mission minded congregation is the local manifestation of the covenant community of the King. As was discussed in the first part of this article, from the time of Abraham, the people of God are seen as a covenant community. Later Israel understood that it was a unique people, as described in Deuteronomy 10:15 (see also Ex 19:5,6; Deut 26:18–19; 1 Pet 2.9). We can see in the Old Testament that Israel saw itself as a special nation created by the direct action of God. They understood that God the Creator of all that exists had chosen them to be a special people with a specific inheritance, with a defined mission and a special hope. To be the people of God meant commitment as an instrument for the good of all the nations. In addition, it meant being within the sphere of the universal action of the sovereignty of God over the entire world.⁷

The election of the church as the new Israel has a similar purpose. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit set up the church so that pagans “may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Pet 2:12). Light to the gentiles... a priesthood for all nations—here is the specific calling and the essential nature of a missionary-minded congregation. She is the missionary nation of God whose reason for being is derived directly from the purposes of God for the world. The specially chosen people of God, for the purpose of their calling, emerge in human history as the covenant community of the King, an arm of the kingdom of God. Whoever grasps the importance of this local congregation in the mission of God should also carefully consider the special nature of the church and its purpose in the world as the covenant community of followers of Jesus the Christ.

As the Body of Christ, we are the community through which Christ is present in and reaching out to the world. The witnessing role of the church is the representation to the world (and to each other in the church) of the fact and opportunity of the gospel. To be the Body of Christ, then, means to be the channels through which the

⁵ This section has been adapted from chapter 7 of Charles Van Engen 1991.

⁶ Several missiologists connect the mission of the church, and in some cases, specifically the multiplying of new churches, with the theme of preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God. See, for example, Juan Driver 1998: 61–69; Darrell L. Guder 2000b:28–48; Fred Herron 2003: 3–30; C. Rene Padilla 1986: 180–193; Daniel Sanchez *et al* 2001:9–14; Howard Snyder and Daniel Runyon 2002: 161; Valdir Steuernagel 1996:154–156; Charles Van Engen *et al* 1993:69–106; Johannes Verkuyl 1978: 89–204 and Johannes Verkuyl 1993: 71–81.

⁷ For more on the universal sovereignty of Christ, see Johannes Blauw, 1974 and Richard R. De Ridder 1975.

work of Christ continues to be done. Christ has committed to his church the proclamation of the great event of reconciliation that he accomplished on the cross, and, in that sense, the completion of the work he both began and did: the declaration of the “wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Pet. 2:9). As his Body, we are to incorporate (“embody”) that message as we proclaim it. (Darrell L. Guder 2000a: 28)

Although the church and the kingdom of God are intimately interrelated, they are not identical. Some years ago, Philip Schaff pointed out that in many passages of the Bible, one may not substitute the church for the kingdom of God as if they were synonymous.⁸ The kingdom of God in its action, time, and state is far deeper, wider, and purer than the church. However, the “already but not yet” aspect of the kingdom is also true for the church. Herman N. Ridderbos, George Eldon Ladd, Oscar Cullman, John Bright, and others stressed that the kingdom, the active rule of Jesus Christ, is already present, though it still awaits its fulfillment.⁹ It has come, but it has not yet arrived. (See Charles Van Engen 1991: 101–118.)

Herman Ridderbos says the following:

On the basis of what has been said above it is possible in our opinion to summarize our view of the relation between the *basileia* and the *ekklesia*. There can be no uncertainty about either the connection or the difference between these two fundamental notions: The *basileia* is the great divine work of salvation in its fulfillment and consummation in Christ; the *ekklesia* is the people elected and called by God and sharing in the bliss of the *basileia*. Logically, the *basileia* ranks first, not the *ekklesia*. . . .

Insofar as the *basileia* is already a present reality, the *ekklesia* is also the place where the gifts and powers of the *basileia* are granted and received. It is, further, the gathering of those who, as the instruments of the *basileia*, are called upon to make profession of Jesus as the Christ, to obey his commandments, to perform the missionary task of the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. In every respect the church is surrounded and impelled by the revelation, the progress, the future of the Kingdom of God without, however, itself being the *basileia*, and without every being identified with it. (H. Ridderbos 1962 p.354–356).

⁸ Philip Schaff, 1950: 509. Schaff mentions as examples Matt. 6:9; Mark 10:14; Luke 17:21; 1 Cor. 6:10; Romans 15:17 where substituting the word *church* for *kingdom* would not make any sense. There is general agreement among many theologians that the concepts of *church* and *kingdom* are not synonymous, even though they are intimately related. See, e.g., Herman Ridderbos 1962:347; David J. Bosch 1980:219; Johannes Blauw 1962: 79; and Hans Küng 1971; 94.

⁹ See Ridderbos 1962: 342–45; George Eldon Ladd 1974 and Jürgen Moltman 1977:98–196.

The kingdom of God and the church are related through the person of Jesus Christ, the King of the kingdom, and the Head of the church. The believer becomes a member of the kingdom of God through the redemption found in Jesus Christ, the Head of the body, the church. The Father whose fullness dwells in Christ makes this transference possible (Col 1:13,19). The church and the mission of the kingdom of God are connected. They are not identical, but they are inextricably intertwined in the mission of God through the people of God sent to the world that God loves. What is more, it should be understood that the church is the missionary community of the disciples of the King.¹⁰

This perspective has far-flung consequences for how we perceive missionary communities whose nature and calling are not derived from an affiliation with a certain denomination or any structured institution. Missionary communities exist because they are covenant communities of the King, called to be instruments in the hands of God for the transformation of its environment, and to be a blessing to the nations. In the words of René Padilla:

All churches are called to collaborate with God in the transformation of the world, starting with a gospel centered in Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe, whose dominion provides the basis for a holistic ecclesiology and mission (Padilla 2003b: translation by the editors of this volume).

The church and the kingdom are neither identical nor completely distinct. A new consensus has arisen with respect to the nature of the kingdom.¹¹ This new consensus defines the kingdom as present, inaugurated, and beginning, while also being eschatological, coming, and future. This kingdom cannot be seen physically or institutionally. It is the dynamic and active rule of God through Jesus Christ by the means of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Gospel consists of the good news of the kingdom that has already come and is yet coming. God comes to humanity (Emmanuel), and God reigns over all humanity. Jesus speaks of future signs of the kingdom of God as he unveils his messianic credentials to the disciples of John the Baptist (consider Matt 11:4–6; Isa 61:1–3; Luke 4:18–19). The kingdom is already at hand but still is not manifest. Even though the church is not what it should be, it is still the primary *locus* of the rule of the King amidst the King's loyal subjects, and where the kingdom is manifest during the time between the times, between the Ascension and the Second Coming. The kingdom is at hand, and local churches are the signs that direct the world's attention to the King who comes.

¹⁰ This is a main theme found in the writings of Arthur F. Glasser. It is very clearly found in Arthur Glasser *et al* 2003.

¹¹ Ridderbos 1962:342.

The Church is the Community Ruled by the King.

In every cultural context, missionary congregations need to see themselves as the unique community of those who recognize the authority of Jesus Christ as their Lord and King. These followers of Jesus the Christ are different from other men and women they encounter within the larger sphere of the kingdom of Christ. They freely and voluntarily commit to Jesus Christ as their Lord.¹²

The Church is the Central Locus¹³ of the Rule of the King.

In whatever country or culture they are found, missionary congregations have a central place in the rule of the King because Christ reigns in them in a special way, as the Head of the body, which is the church. The only place where Christ can reign in this way as the Head of the body of Christ is in the church. Therefore, when each new missionary church emerges, God's reign grows. The proclamation of the Gospel results in the conversion of those who were previously in the realm of darkness to enter into the kingdom of light (Rom 6:15–22; Col 1:9–14). In these missionary congregations, one can see that those who were once rebels transformed into followers of the King change to be obedient and ready to do his will. This conversion is at the heart, the essence, of the nature of the local congregation as the covenant community of the King. Therefore, the holistic growth of missionary congregations is a sign of the coming of God's kingdom.

The Church is the Anticipatory Sign of the Rule of the King.

Missionary congregations are made up of those who live out their lives and function in society under God's reign. These people are the "first fruit" of those who wait for the kingdom of God in the world.¹⁴ The church is not the kingdom in its fullness. It is only a sign of the coming kingdom of God that is already here but is yet to come. As a result, Christians live in anxious expectation. In the words of Paul, missionary congregations know that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed" (Romans 8:18–19). Missionary congregations spring forth to the extent in which

¹² Charles Van Engen 1981: 282–283.

¹³ See Karl Barth 1936: 140–141.

¹⁴ Cf. Karl Barth 1958: volume 4.3.2.

they practice, announce, show, and serve as heralds of the coming of God's kingdom, which is already present. Local congregations experience the Lordship of the King as eschatological heralds of the One who is to come. The "already" gradually moves towards the anticipated "not yet," while the church announces the coming of the kingdom.

The Church's Mission is to Spread the Knowledge of the Rule of the King.

As the principle aspect of the coming kingdom of Christ, the missionary congregations are called to spread the knowledge of this reign throughout the world. This means that the local church is not an end in itself. It is also not the end goal of this mission. Local churches are instruments of something greater than themselves; they are instruments of the kingdom of God.

The Church Cannot Create, Bring about, or Expand the Kingdom. It can and Should Only be a Witness to it.

Clearly, we see that the witness is carried out in word and deed,¹⁵ in miracles, signs, and wonders. It is also seen in the transformation of people's lives, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, and in the radical work of creating a new humanity. When the local congregation testifies to the rule of King Jesus, this act becomes part of Christ's reign, which is proclaimed. The kingdom comes when men and women come to know Christ. Consequently, local churches expand the church when they preach, proclaim, and live out their lives in faithfulness and obedience to the King. Congregations participate in the coming of the kingdom when they live in covenant community, as disciples of the King, as branch offices—satellites—of the kingdom of God. As the numbers of those who know and recognize the sovereignty of the King grow, the church becomes the instrument that anticipates the "already but not yet" kingdom of God.

The church cannot bring about the kingdom—only the King can do this. What the church can do is proclaim, come together, and grow in the expectation of the day when every knee will bow and all will confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:10). The New Testament uses the rhetorical device of parables to illustrate the growth of the kingdom—the parable of the ten virgins, of the lamps with oil, and of the wedding feast. Jesus also illustrates this truth through his teaching on the Day of Judgment in Matthew 24 and 25.

The holistic development of the missionary church goes along with the fulfillment of the kingdom through Christ's dominion—the local missionary churches, embodied in one particular time, place, and culture. The church, not the kingdom, is the New Jerusalem (Rev 21). The church, not the kingdom, is made up of those who have washed their clothes in the blood of the

¹⁵ See Harvie Conn 1982.

Lamb (Rev 7:14) and to whom Christ will present himself without stain or blemish (Eph 5:27; Jude 24). Therefore, in this “time-between-times,” we concentrate on the church because we understand that when we build up the missionary congregations, we are already participating in our final goal, the coming of the kingdom (consider Col 1:13–20).

3. Multiplying New Churches Is the Penultimate Goal of God’s Mission.

As the body of Christ, the church is the physical presence of God in this world for the blessing and transformation of the world (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; 1 Peter 2 and 4). This truth obligates us to emphasize the ultimate importance of the church. The universal church, the church in the world, of all times and cultures, is an idea, nothing more. Actually, this church does not exist in concrete, visible form. What exists is a multitude of local congregations or local churches who are each a local manifestation of the church universal. You, I, and all the believers of Jesus Christ will never experience the universal church. The base from which we are sent into the world is the local congregation, in which we experience the communion of saints, and we grow spiritually. As such, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the local congregation of men and women who love Christ and worship God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, the final goal of our mission cannot only be the local congregation. Multiplying, growing, and watching over the development of the local church is the penultimate goal of our mission, as Orlando Costas helps us see (see Orlando Costas 1974: 90; 1979: 37–59; and 1982: 46–48). The final goal of our missionary labor is the glory of God, as we will see in the last part of this article.

The penultimate goal of multiplying healthy churches is essential work. God has chosen the local congregation as his main instrument for his mission in the world. As such, in order to reach the final goal, it is of utmost importance to build thousands of new missionary congregations around the world. God is glorified when people’s lives are changed, and family, socio-economic, and political structures of a city or nation experience a radical transformation. All this is because the Holy Spirit used the local churches to announce the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ in a holistic way, through word and deed, and in a contextually appropriate and biblically sound manner.

E. Because Multiplying New Churches Gives Glory to God

Why multiply new, healthy churches? The fifth reason is one that is over all the others. Multiplying new churches brings glory to God. At the end of the story, building new, healthy churches is not for the glory of a denomination or a missionary organization. It is not for the glory of a pastor or an evangelist. It is not for the glory of the mother church. Our fundamental motivation for multiplying new, healthy churches always must be a profound desire to give glory to God.

1. The Ten Blessings of Ephesians 1

All that has been said previously in this article can be summed up in the words of Paul in the first chapter of Ephesians. Upon beginning his letter to the Ephesians, his main letter regarding the church and its mission, Paul uses the words of one of the oldest hymns of the primitive church. Although the music is not known, the words have been preserved because Paul used them to begin his letter. The hymn contains ten words that grammatically are action verbs. These ten actions are divided into three verses, one for each of the three people of the Trinity. Because of this, I have called this passage, “The Ten Blessings.” Each verse emphasizes the work and special role of each person of the Trinity. This review of what God has done for us is beautiful, profound, and moving. Nevertheless, the most outstanding part of the hymn is a phrase that is repeated three times and serves as a chorus interwoven throughout the hymn. The phrase is, “For the praise of his glory.” See the words of the hymn below.

EPHESIANS 1:1–14 “THE TEN BLESSINGS”

Through the Father

1. Chosen
2. Made saints
3. Predestined
4. Adopted

Chorus: For the praise of his glory.

Through the Son

5. Redeemed
6. Pardoned
7. Made participants of the mystery
8. United with Christ
9. Co-heirs with Him

Chorus: For the praise of his glory.

Through the Holy Spirit

10. Marked with the seal of the promise through the Holy Spirit who is the deposit (first payment) of our inheritance until the redemption of God’s possession

Chorus: For the praise of his glory.

Centuries later, we find an echo of Paul’s emphasis in Ephesians in the writings of Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). A Dutch theology professor, Voetius was one of the first Protestant missiologists. Writing during the beginning of the seventeenth century, Voetius affirmed that biblically the mission of the church has a three-part goal. He declared that the goal of God’s mission in the Bible was *conversio gentili; plantatio ecclesiae; gloria Dei*: (a) the conversion of people to faith in Jesus Christ; (b) the multiplying of

churches; and (c) the glory of God (see J.H. Bavinck 1960: 155ff). During the last five centuries, this perspective has been the most fundamental basis for missionary work among evangelical churches, descendants of the Protestant Reformation. In its most basic, these evangelical churches' motivation for church expansion was derived from the visionary goal that God wants men and women to become followers of Christ, responsible members of the church, and agents of the transformation of their contexts, to the glory of God.¹⁶ Notice that all three parts of Matthew's articulation of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) are to be found here, to “disciple, baptize, and teach.”

2. *The Vision in Revelation*

The new, healthy church that stands out the most in the Bible is the congregation that comes together around the throne of Jesus Christ, the Shepherd of God in the New Jerusalem. What an amazing vision John describes in the last few chapters of Revelation! The angel tells John that he will show him “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev 21:9). This rhetorical figure and verbal picture is one of the main representations of the church of Jesus Christ, which Paul also describes as a bride ready to go to Jesus, her husband (Eph 5:23–27). How marvelous! The angel is presenting the church as the New Jerusalem. The church has become a city with twelve gates that will never close, made from the twelve stones from Aaron's vestments in the tabernacle from the desert. The angel also makes him see that the “kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.” This vision is truly remarkable. The “kings of the earth” bring the splendor of their language, culture, history, and civilization to the New Jerusalem, which is the church, whose temple is Jesus Christ, whose sun and light is Christ, whose doors never close, so that they can constantly and eternally invite all people to wash in the blood of Christ. Then they can come together with all the saints around the throne of the Shepherd. Together, all the members of this new, healthy church sing in a thousand languages, as if in answer to the miracle of Pentecost in Acts 2. All the nations, families, tongues, and tribes of the world praise God with the following hymn of eternity:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever... Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb... Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever...

¹⁶ This phrase is an adaptation of the definition of mission from Donald McGavran 1970:35.

Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations... Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev 4:11; 5:13b; 7:10b, 12; 15:3b; 19:7 NIV).

In the city that represents the church, there is a very special tree—the Tree of Life whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2). To multiply healthy churches is to participate in this vision, to be conduits, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in moving towards this new reality, the new heaven and the new earth—for the praise of the glory of our God. One of the ways in which we represent, signal, prepare the way for, invite others to join in, and participate in this vision is by multiplying new, healthy churches for the glory of God. The Bible teaches us that the people of God, the church, journeys from a garden to a new city, the New Jerusalem.

3. The Final Goal: For the Praise of His Glory

Why should we devote all the money, time, energy, and personnel resources to multiply healthy churches? In this essay, I have suggested that the most fundamental endeavor flows from God’s nature and mission, “For God so loved the world.” Love, God’s initiative, his missionary action, forms the foundation, the basis for all efforts in multiplying new, healthy churches. God’s love, then, forms the fountain from which flow the five reasons we have examined as to why we should multiply new congregations.

- Because God the Father seeks and finds the lost;
- Because the love of Christ compels us;
- Because the Holy Spirit has been sent for all human beings (all flesh);
- Because the local congregation is the primary agent of the kingdom of God;
- Because multiplying churches is for the praise of the glory of God.

We could then express the mission of the church in the following way:

It is the will of God that men and women of all peoples of the earth be invited to become followers of Jesus Christ, responsible members of Christ’s church, joined together in faith communities, in the power of the Holy Spirit. These groups of believers, as the agents of the kingdom of God, seek to transform the reality of their context in order to give praise to God.

The church of Jesus Christ is therefore called to creative missionary action in the world as it seeks to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God in ways that are biblically faithful, contextually appropriate, and globally transformative. The Head of the church is Jesus Christ, the Lord. From this point of view, the church’s’ existence has only one purpose. It exists for the praise of the glory of God.

What will be our motives for multiplying new, healthy churches? Will we choose the human, sinful, selfish, and oppressive motives? Will we choose the motives—and the goals—that the Bible gives us? Will we multiply churches for our own glory? Will we commit ourselves to participate in God’s mission for the praise of his glory?

CONCLUSION

The hope of the world and the possibility to transform the reality that we face today resides in multiplying thousands of new, healthy churches in every city, town, and village throughout the world. These congregations are to be made up of sons and daughters of God, followers of Jesus Christ, blessed with the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit, who intentionally and carefully look to be signs of the coming of the kingdom of God, for the praise of the glory of our God.

Why multiply new, healthy churches in Latin America and throughout the entire world?

- Because God is a God of love. The mission is God’s; the purpose is God’s. Our God, the God of the Bible, does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).
- Because we are chosen in order to serve. We are instruments in the hands of God. We are the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus Christ in the world in order to be a blessing to the nations. As the body of Christ, one aspect of our nature is to raise up new congregations as we would our sons and daughters. All mature congregations have to be mothers of other congregations.
- Because we find ourselves to the extent to which we participate in being instruments of God’s love for all the nations and all human beings (Matt 10:39). The church does not exist to serve its members. On the contrary, the church is made up of members who, together as the people of God, exist in order to be instruments of the love of God to those who do not already know Jesus Christ.
- We are specially called to participate in God’s mission. One of the most appropriate and efficient ways to concretely express this election consists of multiplying new, healthy churches.
- Because always, in every place, we are the people of God, the God who “loved the world so much he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). As such, we are a community of love, the community of the fruit of the Spirit. We do not rest while there are still those who do not know Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, for the praise of the glory of our God.

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