


Challenges of church planting in the book of Acts, its implications for contemporary church

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Church planting is an essential instrument in God's hand to redeem humanity through the power of the gospel. Several church planters and locations have utilised several church planting methods at different eras. The aim of this article is to find out how it was done during the apostolic period and its significance to the body of Christ. The historical-analytical method was used to discover the scriptural foundations of church planting, patterns of church planting in the book of Acts, the challenges accompanying the pattern and its implications for the contemporary church.

Contribution: Therefore, the researcher believes that all Christian missionaries, missions agencies, church planters, missiologists and pastors will have a better understanding of how best to go about the business of Church planting in contemporary times as the article concludes that the church planting pattern in the book of Acts is fundamental and strategic in propagating the gospel in the world today.

Keywords: church planting; pattern; the book of Acts; contemporary church; challenges; implications

Introduction

Church planting movements, both in the early church and in modern times, faced a series of challenges that have necessitated the introduction of various patterns as occasion demands. One prominent pattern in the early church, particularly in the book of Acts, is '*Domus ecclesiae*', a pattern of church planting (Ac 12:12). The use of '*Domus ecclesiae*', meaning house churches as a pattern by 1st-century Christians, is not an inferior alternative to the regular church planting pattern but a valid and biblically authorised form of multi-cultural church planting pattern urgently needed in contemporary missions and churches.

The mandate the Lord Jesus Christ gave the Church after his resurrection is discipleship making of all nations. This divine mandate requires definite and legitimate biblical church planting strategies. Therefore, this article takes a critical look at the church planting pattern evident in the book of Acts, the missionary strategy employed, the challenges that followed and their implications for modern churches. The Bible is the final authority in Christianity regarding anything and, in this case, the multiplication of God's church; therefore, a scriptural understanding of church and church planting is highly imperative.

Scriptural foundations for church planting

Contextually, there is a need for a theological framework for church planting. The essence is that it is vital for the healthy growth and development of the church; this is evident because, generally speaking, our theology of church planting determines the method and model of churches planted. The above supports the statement that correct interpretation of the Bible will give birth to correct methods of propagating the gospel. God is a strategic planner. And there is a scriptural basis for why God does what He plans to do.

The words and works of Jesus Christ show his passion for lost souls in the New Testament, just as the biblical covenant of the Old Testament manifests the loving intent of a merciful God. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ made his intentions known; 'To seek and to save that which was lost'. Powell (1998:25) said the earthly mission of Christ may be seen as 'threefold: to reveal God, to redeem men, and to raise the church'. Thus, this threefold mission reveals the passion of Christ for the lost. The Lord Jesus Christ came to save helpless humanity from the tyranny of sin and gather the saved into a new community of faith who will serve God in holiness and righteousness without fear throughout their lives.

The research needs to define the church before explaining church planting. According to Daria (2011:527), the word church denotes a building where Christians meet for religious worship. In a broader perspective, it denotes a variety of relationships, ranging from Christians professing a particular faith to the entire body of faithful, through the practice of their faith or in their dealings with the state.

The Scripture uses different images to designate the church. The most common and acceptable image is the people of God, which permeates both the Old and the New Testaments. While some Christian scholars agree that the concept of a man (Abram) 'being sent' by God in Genesis 12:1 to establish a new gathering of people in a foreign land who will live distinctively from the natives is sufficient scriptural evidence of the idea of a church in the Old Testament, others share the different view from that school of thought. For instance, Norskon (1990:17) contends that the designation 'people of God' binds together the meaning and oneness of ecclesia in all ages. He insists that the church has always existed as a 'people of God' right from the time of Adam to the contemporary time, though at times, the church has been exceedingly weak and so dispersed that it was noticeable nowhere. He also affirms the church as 'people of God', implying that there is 'never merely a particular class of caste within the fellowship of the faithful'. On the contrary, fundamentally, all believers are the church and are members of the people of God (Norskon 1990).

On the contrary, Nihinlola (2021:184) posits that the statement of Jesus Christ, 'I will build my church', indicates at least two things. Firstly, the church did not exist when Jesus Christ spoke; the establishment would be a future action; secondly, the church is to be identified with Jesus Christ. Emiola asserts that the phrase 'My church' then 'May refer in the first instance to Jesus' community, intended to act as a remnant within the people of God (Nihinlola 2021). Though the scholarship storm ranging on this concept has not abated, this article's position is that every action of Jesus Christ concerning the Kingdom of God is rooted in the Law and the Prophets.

Elwell's (1996:95) view is that the New Testament word for church is *ecclesia*, which means 'the called-out ones'. Elwell affirms that *ecclesia* predominantly applies to a local assembly of people who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ. The word *ecclesia* also denotes the universal church. The Scripture portrays the church as a divine institution, 'the church of God' or 'the church of Christ'.

After the above statement on the subject of the church, the researcher briefly explores church planting. Wagner (1990) said planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology under the heaven (p. 73). According to Francis Daria, the missionary mandate to 'go and make disciples of all nations', which includes all people groups in the world, is suggestive that the most effective method for doing it has

been planting new congregations. Furthermore, Daria (2011:14) affirms that Jesus' final charge to his disciples, 'and you shall be witnesses to me both in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth', demonstrates that church planting should be both local and global. Any casual student of Christian missions will find that church planting is the primary means through which God advances his Kingdom on earth.

Feeney (1988:25) observes that witnessing Christians scattering the precious seed of the Word of God expedites the conversion of additional souls to Jesus Christ, and through that means, churches reproduce churches. Feeney said a trace of evangelistic activities of the apostles in the book of Acts gave rise to new churches whenever there was any significant success in evangelism (Feeney 1988). Similarly, Emmanuel (1997:17) observes that the command to 'make disciples' is a sure instruction that leads to the multiplication of new believers. Osei maintains that the Great Commission committed the apostles to make disciples of all ethnos and evangelise every people group. Inherent in the Great Commission was planting new churches within each people group.

Clowney (1995:159) pointed out that Jesus Christ came to gather and call gatherers, disciples who would gather with him, seeking the helpless and poor from the city streets and country roads. The mission is not an optional activity for the disciples of Jesus Christ.

If it were not for church planting, there would be no church today. The contemporary church exists because the early Christians planted churches. The multiplications of churches in the past have resulted in new churches in the present. Timothy and Thompson (2002:29) insist that church planting is the single most effective method for the numerical growth of God's Kingdom on earth and the corporate renewal and revival of existing churches. God has always been devotedly and soteriologically involved in the affairs of men. Through the church, God is presently reaching out to the world of men and delivering them from the poison of sin through Jesus Christ, who is the only antidote to sin.

There might be an argument that there is nowhere in the Bible where the words 'church' and 'plant' or any combination of associated words are used in the Scripture. Nevertheless, the Bible also says a lot about church planting as it seeks to describe the establishment of God's Kingdom (Ac 14:1-28); it is the means God uses to advance his redemptive acts through the church. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, describes the early church's growth through church planting.

Church planting pattern in the book of Acts

The book of Acts is the most remarkable and profound church planting manual in the history of Christianity. If a graphic pattern or model for church planting is in the

scriptures, it would undoubtedly be that of the early church, particularly in the book of Acts. Any curious student of the Bible will discover biblical church planting principles and patterns while studying Acts.

One striking feature of the early church was the zeal to evangelise. Furthermore, those who communicated the faith were not the officially designated evangelist nor the zealous members; evangelism was the duty of every church member (Green 1974:274). Jesus' disciples followed his commands to reach out and preach to the world, evangelising, baptising people as they became believers and teaching them to obey the entire commandment that Jesus taught them. The disciples were imitators of Jesus Christ who went from one village and town to another proclaiming the gospel.

The early church's missionary business was evangelism, which planted new '*Domus ecclesiae*', that is, house churches. The Apostles were not intentional in terms of a planned methodology; instead, they appeared to respond to the developing church with structures that became house churches (Powell 1998:25). The traditional method of Kingdom advancement is to preach about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and in doing so, people were gathered at home churches, ultimately leading to church growth and Kingdom expansion.

Archaeological evidence revealed a site in Capernaum on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee with a sign standing near the Synagogue's ancient ruins, written in Latin and English; '*Domus Ecclesia*' (Powell 1998). Church historians and archaeologists argue that the site was an early Christian house church used by the apostles (White 2012:211). The authenticity and historical accurateness of the site, like so many others in Israel, are questionable. However, it remains there as silent biblical proof of the conviction about the existence of house churches in the 1st century of Christianity in Palestine.

Several indications in the book of Acts indicate that house churches were evidence and accepted in the days of the early apostles. A private residence for Christian worship was an acceptable practice and pattern in the Apostolic period and beyond. For example, Luke said, 'the early disciples continued each day with harmony in the temple and fellowshiping from house to house, eating their food with gladness and simplicity of heart' (Ac 2:46). Again, Luke recorded that when an angel miraculously released Peter, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where multitudes gathered together praying. At the beginning of the religious challenge on the early church, Luke also gave an account of Saul, the chief persecutor of the time who later became an apostle of Christ, who wreaked mayhem on the church by entering houses, one after the other, dragging off both men and women into prison. Other New Testament examples include 'The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord and so does the church that meets at their house'.

Frederic Louis Godet, a French theologian, said 1 Corinthians 16:19 is indicative of other similar house churches in Ephesus. According to him, the fact that Paul says, 'The churches (plural) of Asia salute you', indicates he had had frequent contact with the representatives of those churches. Godet (1889) concludes that Paul had in mind the multitude of small groups that met in the homes of Christians in Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea; these were those that sent their greetings to the house church in Corinth (p. 69). One of the prominent patterns of church planting in the book of Acts is house churches.

The advent of Paul into the early church after his conversion from Judaism to Christianity opened an innovative and dynamic pattern of evangelism and church planting movement into Christianity. Apostle Paul was strategic in his pattern of evangelism and church planting. Luke confirms that it was customary for Paul to attend Synagogues and preach Jesus Christ to the people each time he visited any city. In each of Paul's missionary expeditions, he crossed the Mediterranean world, going from city to city with the Good News of the Kingdom of God and planting churches.

When referring to Paul's pioneering works, Scott (1990:58) observed that in each missionary journey, major capital cities like Thessalonica, Macedonia's capital, and Corinth, the capital of Achaia and Ephesus, the capital of Asia, were Paul's target for evangelism and church planting. For Paul, the pattern of church planting is urban. As Scott affirms, the strategies of Paul included proclaiming the Good News in the urban areas, and after that, the gospel could spread to the rural areas surrounding each metropolitan centre (Scott 1990).

Supporting the position of Greenway (1978:15), Scott (1990:59) stated, 'Apostle Paul proved himself an effective urban strategist in evangelising the towns and cities. He fashioned out strategies to evangelise the cities and towns at every available opportunity'. In Greenway's view, Paul sees the cities and towns as a stronghold of social evils and that evangelising and planting vibrant new churches proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God and making disciples is the power to combat them (Scott 1990). This article supports the above scholars' views about Paul's church planting pattern.

Another pattern of church planting evident in the book of Acts is the founding of churches in synagogues and public theatres (Scott 1990).

Furthermore, the evangelism team is also evident as a pattern for church planting in Acts. The image that emerges in Acts about Paul is a missionary with many associates. Undeniably, one scarcely found Apostle Paul without a companion in all his missionary journeys.

Paul practised corporate evangelism, and an examination of Acts reveals Paul was undoubtedly not a lone ranger in church planting enterprise. Instead, he collaborated with fellow soldiers during his life and ministry. Paul

exemplified team spirit in the work of evangelism and church planting. The position of this article is that Paul did what he emphasised and taught the churches to do, Christian togetherness and unity in worship, service and missions.

In addition to having associates to work with in church planting, the book of Acts also reveals another approach to Paul's church planting pattern using the Greco-Roman theatres and marketplaces. All alone in Athens, unaccompanied by fellow soldiers or disciples, surrounded by idols, Paul faced a stern challenge (Scott 1990). Nevertheless, he preached the Good News of the Kingdom of God in the idolatrous society using the Areopagus hill to gather people. Paul deploys religiously neutral places to start a church. Scott (1990:58) commented, 'Paul's spent much time in the evangelistic ministry using these secular situations—the neutral places and environment attracted diverse members of the society like the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers'. Paul utilised every available means to preach the gospel and plant churches.

Challenges of church planting pattern in the book of Acts

Religious | Doctrinal challenge

The first recorded challenge in the book of Acts of the Apostles concerning church planting is the intra-religious and doctrinal conflict between Christianity and Judaism. After the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, which coincided with the inauguration of the first church in Jerusalem, the religious leaders of Judaism initiated religious persecution against the church after working on healing a lame man. In the book of Acts 3, Peter and John brought healing to a man crippled from birth. The narrative stresses the suddenness and completeness of the cure, together with the wonder and amazement of the bystanders. Peter and John were arrested by the authorities and brought before the Sanhedrin, who charged them not to speak any longer in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Their persecutors started threatening to deal with them if they went on preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. The battle here was against Christ and his doctrines *vis-à-vis* the teachings of Judaism, from where Christianity originated. The primary reason is the matter of Christology – the teachings and person of Jesus Christ. The tragic story of the impact of the gospel in Jerusalem came to a terrible climax when Stephen died. The religious or doctrinal challenge between the council of the children of Israel and Christianity grew from mere threats to violent attacks on the church, and this escalated into severe persecutions both by the Jewish religious sects and later by the Roman Emperors. The view of Peterson (2009) is that

[T]hough the disciples of Jesus Christ face other conflicts, the central challenge of the plot of the Jewish leaders that repeatedly emphasised and still present in the larger part of the mission of the early church, is a conflict within Judaism provoked by Jewish Christian preachers (including Paul). (p. 166)

Racial | Tribal challenge

Another challenge that confronted the church planting pattern was the problem of racial or tribal differences. Undoubtedly, Peter played a pioneering role in the evangelisation of the Gentiles. He was the first man employed to admit uncircumcised Gentiles into the Christian community. Cornelius, a Roman soldier, is the first with his family and friends to be admitted, thus becoming the first-born of the Gentiles to Christ (Henry 1991:100). However, Simon Peter could not comprehend the gospel preached to a gentile Roman army colonel and a church planted in his house because of racial predisposition. Peter was full of racial bias for planting a church in Cornelius's home, and God rebuked him for that.

Stagg (1955:120) concluding remarks about Peter's church planting work in Caesarea echo the missiological goal of the ever-widening scope of Christian missions; the obstacle of national or local racism and separatism, the barrier of predisposition that looks down on others as 'unclean' is overcome. Interestingly, Apostle Peter spent several days in the city of Caesarea, fellowshipping with the new church members in the house of Cornelius (Polhill 1992:264). The challenge of preserving the Hebrew identity, a racial undertone, constituted a significant obstacle in church planting by the early Jewish Christians. After this account in Acts, there are fine shreds of evidence that subsequent churches like the one in Antioch overcame racial and ethnic barriers in their community (eds. Gallagher & Hertig 2004:151).

Political challenge

Beginning as a detestable, illegitimate religious sect, Christianity suffered 300 years of hostility to emerge as the dominant movement in the Roman Empire (Ferguson 2021:17). Paul and his missionary associates dared political figures and institutions while planting churches in the Greco-Roman Empire. Standing trial for the sake of the gospel and the expansion of the Kingdom of God through church planting is a difficult mission. The elders of Israel (members of the Sanhedrin council) set up Paul against the political authority with a capital crime. However, Paul witnessed the three political figures – Felix, Festus and the titular Jewish king Agrippa II (Polhill 1992:476). For instance, the author of this article believes the presence of Paul in the court of Felix, Festus and King Agrippa, for the sake of the gospel proves the possibility of planting a church in the Governors' office if he had succeeded.

Socio-cultural challenges

The Greco-Roman religions were tolerant of the Christian faith at the beginning. The Empire accepted the Greek deities and the Jewish monotheistic God as 'legal religions' (Polhill 1992). However, there was a problem of socio-cultural conflicts in planting a church in Acts. For example, after Paul and his missionary associates planted a church in Lydia, according to Paul's usual pattern, they sought out the Jewish Synagogue first; when there was none, the riverside became a place where the church met for prayers. They encountered

a slave girl who could tell the future of their missionary outings. As one writer rightly affirms, the Greco-Roman world was full of saviours and deliverers and even the emperor doubled himself as the 'saviour' of the people.

The narratives had it that a 'python spirit possessed a slave girl' followed them shouting they were 'servants of the Most-High God' and 'proclaimers of the way of salvation'. In a firm form reminiscent of Jesus' exorcisms, Paul commanded the spirit to exit the girl, and the spirit did so immediately (Polhill 1992:476). Paul and Silas got the brunt of the owners, and the owner pushed them into the marketplace with three count charges aimed at awakening latent prejudices in the crowd, evoking the mentions of the Roman magistrates responsible for law and order and illegal proselytising for Judaism – advocating customs unlawful for Romans (Polhill 1992). This incident provides a potent challenge for any furtherance of church planting in any part of that city or region of the Roman Empire.

Economic challenge

Two economic markers account for a prosperous state, a viable market institution and a stable government in global economics. However, generally, at this period in the history of the Greco-Roman Empire, the ancient economy was in its infancy, and the government was relatively unstable (Temin 2006:133–151). Historical accounts suggest that the general economic condition of the Greco-Roman Empire was not favourable at that time when they planted new churches. A worldwide famine occurred in AD 41–54 during the reign of Emperor Claudius, a period of 13 years. Such a global economic meltdown would have affected the ancient economy of the Roman Empire. Moreover, the aftermath of the series of wars waged by the barbarian tribes against the Roman Empire generally weakened the entire economy of the Empire.

It was customary for every child born in a Jewish family to learn a trade, and Paul trained in tent-making – a trade peculiar to the Jews living in Tarsus of Cilicia. Bruce (1977) contribution to tent-making and about Apostle Paul's paradigm is worth noting here. He said:

[P]aul supported himself and his companions by his tent-making. Many rabbis practised a trade to impart their teaching without charge. Paul scrupulously maintained this tradition as a Christian preacher, partly as a matter of principle, partly by example to his converts, and partly to avoid allowing his critics to say that his motives were mercenary. When hospitality was spontaneously offered [for example, Lydia]... he gladly accepted it; it would have been ungracious to refuse. (p. 220)

Apostle Paul used his trade to fund the planting of new churches in the embryonic economy of the Roman Empire.

Spiritual challenge

There are spiritual dimensions to church planting, just as in all areas of the Christian life. From the account in Acts 13, the church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys on the note of fasting and fervent

praying. Setting out from Antioch, they travelled about 16 miles to the port city of Seleucia to Cyprus. They went to the Synagogue to preach the Word of God as their custom. After travelling through the Island, they arrived at Paphos, where they encountered a Jewish magician, Bar-Jesus, a personal assistant to the proconsul Sergius Paulus.

Paul and Barnabas, while preaching the Good News, presumably after going into the Jewish Synagogues, had an unexpected invitation from the proconsul who wanted to hear God's word. However, spiritual warfare ensues between the apostles and the magician (Guzik 2021). Paul confronts Elymas harshly with stern judgment. This article believes the resultant effect of blindness from that spiritual conflict, in addition to the words of God that Sergius Paulus believed, started a new church in Paphos. Paul and Barnabas experienced a spiritual challenge in their missionary outreach to evangelise and plant churches in Cyprus.

Administrative Leadership challenge

Planting new churches is one thing; getting the appropriate leadership for the new church is entirely different. The new churches' immediate and future survival hinged on the pioneering leadership's administrative and leadership competence. For example, Paul's address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 addresses the leadership of the new church in Ephesus. One observed that Paul the evangelist models a unique Pastoral figure in this address in Acts 20 (Guzik 2021).

Paul's mention of moving from house to house might imply that many churches in Ephesus are homely organised. Probably, each elder was in charge of a particular house church in the province (Guzik 2021). These elders are synonymous with pastors in the modern-day church administrative cadre. Paul understood the vital role of leadership in a local church and addressed the issue while planting churches around the Roman Empire.

Environmental challenge

The environmental challenge here refers to the weather conditions prevalent in the time of Paul and his associates in their missionary journeys. Whether it was winter, summer and autumn, there are no biblical accounts that any of these prevented Paul from reaching out to preach and planting house churches. The environmental situations were not all the time favourable to Paul. Nevertheless, Paul overcame all in the mission to the Gentiles.

Implications for modern churches

The early Christians and Paul used private homes as their platform for reaching the house owners' and community members' friends and relatives. This strategy of Paul and his early disciples can work in other cultures, even those that tended to resist the gospel. This method could be a practical approach in Muslim areas where the women live under the constraints of the *purdah*. Female Christian missionaries could take advantage of this opportunity by visiting these

Muslim women in the *purdah* during the day while their husbands are out of their houses for their businesses.

The '*Domus ecclesiae*' pattern of church planting is easy and the cheapest for starting a new church. Modern churches can adopt this pattern of church planting in cross-cultural and multi-religious communities without resistance from either the local or regional government. The home church pattern can multiply churches faster and more effectively than the new converts' traditional methods of centralised worship.

Again Apostle Paul uses venues that are not religious to start churches. Modern churches can also adopt this method. Generally, people appreciate neutral places, incredibly non-threatening religious sites. Today, civic centres, hotel conference rooms and school halls are neutral places. Faw (1993:215) asserted that using this strategy gave Paul ample opportunities to impact Ephesus more than any other cities or towns mentioned in the book of Acts. Modern churches have more excellent opportunities than Paul and the early Christians to use this method as there are more houses in this world than in the early days of Christianity.

Conclusion

Everyone who desires to promote the success of Christian missions in this modern time will admit that the records of Apostle Paul and the early Christians have significantly transcended the limitations of time and space. The parameter or yardstick for measuring the missionary's success and progress should be wholistically considered through spiritual, numerical and financial growth.

For Apostle Paul and the early disciples, not a few Christian missionaries today would deny that the principles of church planting pattern in the book of Acts is based on their missionary methods that are universally applicable to all countries and in contemporary Christian missions.

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A.O.A. is the sole author of this research article.

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