

Getting Kingdom Right To Get Church Right

March 01, 2019 by [Steve Smith](#)

What comes to your mind when you hear about a movement of God in which almost 200 churches were started within three years in a remote people group?

What comes to your mind when you hear about a movement of God in which 150,000 urban and rural churches were started in a ten-year span?¹

Incredulity may be your first response, perhaps followed by suspicion or excitement. Yet Church Planting Movements (CPMs) like these are spreading around the world in all types of cultures and religious worldviews. In these movements, successive generations of disciples and churches move consistently past the 4th generation in a short duration of time.

These movements sound foreign to many of us who have lived in more traditional churches where the kingdom has been established for centuries. But CPM-like movements are not simply a modern phenomenon. They have characterized the kingdom of God from Acts onward throughout church history.

Both Scripture and church history demonstrate that our Father wants such movements to be the norm when the Lord's Prayer is fulfilled: "May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven!"

Get Kingdom Right to get Church Right

As disciples throughout history have made it their priority to see the kingdom explode among lost populations, they have often seen churches multiply rapidly generation by generation through ordinary new believers. Unfortunately, as churches become established, a tendency emerges to consolidate efforts and focus more on the church development than on kingdom expansion. Which priority is right? Kingdom first or church first? Both are important, but to get church right, we must get kingdom right.

Gospels: The Priority of the Kingdom

Jesus' entire ministry was focused on initiating the kingdom of God. He used the word "kingdom" over 100 times, while He used the word "church" only twice. His first words in Mark were about the kingdom:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."(Mark 1:15, NASB)

The word "repent" means to change your whole way of thinking. The present tense signifies a continuous action— "keep on changing your whole way of thinking." Jesus was launching a kingdom so radical in nature that we must realign our whole concept of what God wants to do in and through us, especially in how He will do it. This includes how we live as Church.

Jesus' central prayer was about the kingdom:

⁹Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:9-10, NASB)

Jesus taught us to pray that our city, neighborhood, nation or people group will so reflect His glory and reign that it is like heaven on earth. *Does Jesus ask us to pray for something that He doesn't intend to fulfill?* God is not satisfied with a handful of believers, small groups or churches in a people group or city. *His* vision is for a *multitude* of people worshipping Him from every people group.

Jesus' central mission was about the kingdom:

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."(Matt. 24:14, NASB)

Everything in history is moving toward this final destination. His final teaching in Acts was about the kingdom:

"To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God."(Acts 1:3, NASB)

Jesus' first, central and last words were about establishing the reign of the King. They summed up His life mission. His mission must be our mission.

Acts:

Establishing the Kingdom Through the Church

In Acts, the word “church” is used twice as much as the word “kingdom.” The next progression in Jesus’ strategy to establish His kingdom on earth was taking place—planting multiplying churches as agents of His kingdom coming on earth.

But clear in the thinking of the early disciples was the priority of establishing the kingdom through the church. Their priority was still the King and reaching the lost through expanding His kingdom. For example:

And he [Paul] entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. . . . He withdrew from [the synagogue] and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:8-10 NASB)

The result was that many churches were established as the kingdom was established. In the one movement above in Acts 19, most likely dozens of churches or more were started in this Roman province called Asia—churches that matured deeply and spread rapidly. Most scholars agree that in this two-year span of time the seven churches of Revelation were started by new disciples like Epaphras in Colossae (Col. 1:7).

Even the closing words of Acts are about the kingdom:

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. (Acts 28:30-31, NASB)

From the beginning to the end of Jesus’ ministry His focus, both personally and through His disciples, was on the King’s reign.

Jesus knew that if we could get the kingdom (King-reign) right, we would get church right.

Romans to Revelation:

A Balanced Approach and a Caution

The word “church” is used more in Romans to Revelation, almost three times as much as the word “kingdom.” Yet we continue to get a balance of expanding the kingdom

while establishing the church. The vision of the Lord's Prayer continues to imbue the New Testament church and the paradigms of church are subjected to the needs of the kingdom. In Revelation one church is praised that its latter works exceeded its first (Rev. 2:19), while others are chastised for losing their vision and love for the King (Rev. 2:4). This latter church was the Ephesian church which saw such explosive growth decades earlier in Acts 19 cited above.

There is a lesson here for us: It is easy for churches to subtly shift their focus from the King and His kingdom, often becoming obsessed with themselves and their own successes, structures or traditions. The church then and today is in danger of repeating the mistakes that Jesus chastised the Jewish leaders for:

“And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’” (Mark 7:9 ESV)

How easy it is for us to elevate the church along with our structures, programs and traditions above the vision of knowing the King and establishing His kingdom. We easily lose sight of the end-vision. When we focus on church first, we get kingdom wrong.

Why Church?

Yet make no mistake: Church is at the heart of God's kingdom plan! It is not either church or kingdom. It is both. When the Church submits herself to the King and His kingdom ways, then the Church emerges in all her intended glory!

God's plan from the beginning was to sum up everything in heaven under His son Jesus:

God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. (Eph. 1:9-10 NLT)

Yet God's plan has always been to fill the universe with His glory through the church, the bride of Christ and body of Christ:

And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:22-23 ESV)

The Church was meant to be the agent of filling the whole earth with the glory of God—His King-reign—as the body. The Church was meant to be the eternal companion of the Son as the bride. Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19-21 present a glorious picture of the Church being presented to the Son spotless and radiant. All of history is moving toward the preparation and presentation of this bride to the Son. This is why we focus unquestionably on *Church Planting Movements*, not simply people movements. We don't start churches because this is the most pragmatic way to reach people. We start churches because this is God's plan in His eternal kingdom. In fact, starting churches is intensely pragmatic, but that is the beauty of God's design in establishing the church as a visible expression and means of His kingdom. It is easy for new believers to lose headway in their spiritual growth if they are not incorporated as a part of the precious body of Christ locally.

What Will it Take to Reach All of the Lost? Church Planting Movements

The history of the church from Acts to the present is replete with new movements of multiplying disciples and churches. Throughout history, men and women, burdened with the question, "What will it take to reach all of the lost?" have subjected their preferences, traditions and paradigms to the vision of kingdom expansion.

In an age in which the evangelism of most established churches and denominations lag far behind population growth, fresh examination is required to answer that simple question: "*What will it take to reach all of the lost in our generation?*" Believers from all traditions must cry out to the Heavenly Father with the same humble desperation of that first prayer: "Father, cause your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven!"

There are places in the world in which the numbers of new disciples and churches are growing faster than the pace of local population, or showing signs of moving in that direction. These Church Planting Movements in their varicolored hues recall to us the vision of kingdom come and the spirit of Acts. They hearken back to historical

movements such as the Wesleyan movement or early Baptist church-planting. Only through movements in which, through the priesthood of the believer, each disciple carries the DNA and authority to pass on what he or she has learned and can train others to do the same, will we see the lost reached in our generation.

Sacrificing Paradigms of Church for the Kingdom

Yet in all movements, questions arise about the new forms, the new church paradigms, the new methods, the new ways. Whether the Apostle Paul or John Wesley, these paradigms are initially derided by the established Church. But through sheer endurance and lasting fruit, many of these paradigms eventually become the norm. Too often what is radical today is commonplace tomorrow.

Historically, the leaders of these movements have sacrificed their expectations, paradigms and structures for the good of the kingdom. Their desire to see the kingdom come and the Word obeyed has challenged them to surrender their ways of doing things to the Spirit's leadership. They have been more preoccupied with building the kingdom than on perpetuating a particular model of doing church. Their goal has not been a perfect model of church but a perfect spread of the kingdom.

There is no uniform biblical model of what a church must be. We see numerous examples of culturally adapted models in the Scriptures. There is room for a number of types of churches fulfilling unique roles in each society.

In pursuing the vision of the Lord's Prayer, however, for the sake of reaching all of the lost, we often advocate reproducible churches that can spread endlessly through a society by the hands of ordinary believers led by the Spirit.

The Spirit is moving in powerful ways around the world. We are always in the same danger that the religious leaders of Jesus' day faced, of hardening our methods and structures against the Spirit:

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”(Matt. 9:17 ESV)

The church is in ferment around the world because the wine of the Spirit is in ferment. Our first desire must be the Spirit of the King and His kingdom come. Let us adjust our structures to what He directs by the Word in each new community. Let us not become hardened, self-focused and brittle. Rather let us be inspired in these pages to sacrifice our paradigms to the spread of His kingdom in every people!