

## Reclaiming Ambitious Sending

### Romans 15:20-21

*“Through church planting the church has survived.” –Aubrey Malphurs<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

Why would we plant a church? Why would we plant *now*? Why would we plant in New England? Why would we send out faithful leaders and families?

Have you ever met brand new believer who was on fire for the Lord? Everywhere they go and to everyone they meet, they talk about Christ excitedly and experientially. They are always witnessing and telling others about the Gospel. And then there’s the rest of us—we have been Christians for a long time and our passion doesn’t quite measure up. We might even think “What’s wrong with this guy?” when we should really be asking “What’s wrong with me?”

**Forgetting the Gospel.** The reason a passionate new believer might rub us the wrong way is because they have revealed something about us—we have a memory problem. We forget the significance of God’s grace and we as individuals often take the gospel and our salvation for granted. We are so used to them. The further removed we are from the date of our conversion, the more familiar we become; and familiarity breeds contempt or apathy. We have Gospel amnesia.

**Undervaluing Church.** This is not simply an individual problem, but a corporate problem. The same goes for the church. The more familiar church becomes to us, the more we take church for granted. We’re so used to having a healthy church we forget that in other places, healthy churches are few and far between. **A church that is not passionate about sending and planting is out of touch with the spiritual battle raging on around them.**

The further removed we are from our founding, the more we take planting for granted. A church that is not passionate about planting is out of touch with its own unique history. Have you considered the fact that from the very beginning at Pentecost, every church that exists has been planted one way or another? This church was planted 60 years ago. All the benefits of this church that we enjoy today can be traced back to a small group of families who in 1963 saw a need for a brand new church in Simi Valley. **A church that is not passionate about planting is out of touch with its own unique history.** A church that is disconnected from its history is usually disengaged missionally.

Last week Danny talked about reclaiming authentic fellowship; this morning we will discuss the other side of the coin—reclaiming ambitious sending. Our church must have an inward focus. And this inward focus is our default. But the church also needs an outward emphasis as well. There’s a time to intentionally come together and there’s a time to strategically separate so that our witness can multiply and the Gospel can advance. We gather to grow in wisdom, maturity, and love, but we separate so others might have what we have and enjoy the blessings we enjoy.

Paul writes these words as he is separated from his beloved brothers and sisters in Rome. He makes it clear that the reason for their separation is his mission. Although he longs to be with them, he is passionate about bringing the gospel to unreached people in hard places. He was a frontier missionary who wanted to cross cultures and reach the unreached peoples and places.

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<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 11.

Ambition: *Philotimeomai*: a compound word made up of *phílos*, meaning love, and *timḗ*, meaning properly perceived value, worth, honor. Put together it means to zealously pursue, eagerly strive for a specific task with a specific end goal.

Dave Harvey defines ambition as, “Someone willing to pursue a valued prize with uncommon devotion.”<sup>2</sup> We often think of athletes with uncommon resolve like Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Michael Phelps or businessmen who’ve changed the world like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Bill Gates. But here in our text we see the most ambitious missionary of all time. And Paul’s ambition was of a greater eternal significance. He was ambitious about the Gospel. The valued prize was souls saved. The priority was evangelizing and establishing new churches.

## 1. Paul’s Ambitious Mission—To preach Christ where he is not named (v.20a)

*“Thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named . . .”*

In Paul’s day, the Apostles’ mission expanded out from their home in concentric circles to the world. Jesus commissioned them saying, “You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8) In verse 19, Paul says something stunning. He says that “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum, I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ.” In other words, the people have been reached. He has passed on the baton and there are boots on the ground—disciples making disciples. Christ is named, now he must move on.

In 1813, Adoniram Judson was the first American missionary to go overseas. This sparked an American foreign missions movement. But since then, when we think of missions, we automatically think international—Africa, Japan, India. Rarely do we think of domestic ministry as missions. We forget the faithful domestic missionaries of the past like David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, and John Eliot. Historically we have been a Christian nation, Christ was named here, but in our lifetime the spiritual landscape is shifting quickly. Christianity is on a steady decline and we need more people on mission here in the U.S. The statistics are staggering—

**Young people are leaving the church.** In this post-modern era, deconstruction and deconversion are on the rise. Some 70 percent of youth leave the church by the time they are twenty-two years old. And 80 percent become disengaged by the time they are twenty-nine.<sup>3</sup>

**The “nones” are rapidly rising.** In the 1930’s and 40’s, the religiously unaffiliated were 5 percent of the population in the U.S. By 1990, it has grown to 8 percent. In 2008, it nearly doubled to 15 percent. In 2012, 20 percent. Today it is 27 percent.<sup>4</sup>

**We live in a secular age.** Philosopher Charles Taylor has declared this to be a secular age. He explains we got here in a slow process: 1) Public spaces have been emptied of God, 2) Religious belief and practice is on decline, 3) Belief in God has shifted from being unchallenged to being just one option among many.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 18.

<sup>3</sup>Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian* (Chicago, Moody, 2010), 17.

<sup>4</sup>James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 22.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 2-3.

In a recent book, Al Mohler wrote, “In terms of the intellectual elites and the culture forming sectors of society, theism is not an available worldview. **Many people in the most privileged sectors of our modern societies do not even know a believing Christian.** They are no longer even haunted by the remains of a Christian frame of mind. They are truly secular . . . There is no social capital to be gained by joining a congregation defined by biblical truth.”<sup>6</sup> Christ’s name is not on the lips of more than 150 million Americans.

**Romans 10:14**—“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

Paul’s ambitious was to preach in a secular place where Christ was not known, where Christians and churches were sparse. He was a trailblazing pioneer missionary. We must follow his ministry model.

## 2. Paul’s Ambitious Resolution—To build on a fresh foundation (v. 20b)

*“so that I would not build on another man’s foundation;”*

Paul’s mission was to preach the Gospel where Christ was not named, yet he was strategic about his process. He fully supported the other Apostle’s missions efforts, but he was resolved to go to challenging places and start fresh. He didn’t want to build on another man’s foundation, he desired to have a **ground-breaking ministry** that established brand new faith and brand new churches in unreached areas. Neil Cole believes that Paul probably planted 20 churches himself with many more daughter, grand-daughter, and great-grand-daughter churches birthed from those.<sup>7</sup> Here in the U.S., we need more churches. With the rise of secularism comes the decline of the church—

**Declining Membership.** In just 2 decades, church membership dropped from 70% in 1999 to 50% in 2019. Now it is currently 47%. For the first time, church membership has fallen below the majority. Membership in the U.S. is on a rapid decline.<sup>8</sup>

**Church closures.** It is estimated that 4 thousand to 8 thousand churches close their doors every year (75-150 per week). Churches are closing their doors at a rate of 3 or 4 times higher than the number of new churches being planted. Church planting is slowing, and the number of closures is growing.<sup>9</sup> Churches are not replicating as fast as we are closing. This is not sustainable.

John Piper has said that “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”<sup>10</sup> Church planting exists because every day churches are closing their doors. Church planting is vital because the Church is always one generation away from extinction. Through church planting the church has survived. Church planting has been the model since the very beginning of the Church. We must hold the line, we must stand in the gap to continue this great tradition. Yes, there is a need for revitalizing existing churches that are struggling. Yes, there is a need to send pastors to existing churches without a shepherd. But the greater, more desperate need of the hour is for more Christians to be sent out and more churches to be planted in

<sup>6</sup> Albert Mohler, *The Gathering Storm* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2020), 10, xv.

<sup>7</sup> Neil Cole, “How Many Churches Did the Apostle Paul Start?” *Churchplanting.com*, Feb 24, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” *Gallup.com*, March 29, 2021

<sup>9</sup> Yonat Shimron, “Study: More Churches Closing than Opening.” *Religionnews.com*, May 26, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2010).

secular strongholds. The same need that drove missionaries to go to foreign countries now drives us to focus on our own.

### 3. Paul's Ambitious Expectation—That eyes and ears would be opened (v. 21)

*“Those who have never been told will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”*

What Paul does next is quote from Isaiah 52:15 which is the beginning of the well-known section on the Suffering Servant in chapter 53. A major theme throughout Isaiah is the salvation of the Gentiles. Isaiah 49:6 says, **“It is too small a thing** that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you a light to for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Going all the way back to the Abrahamic Covenant, it is clear that God’s heart is for the nations.

In his mission to preach and his resolution to plant, Paul had a posture of expectancy. He was full of hope. He didn’t limit the outcome. He left the results to God trusting in Christ’s heart for the lost and believing that God can do abundantly more than he could ask or think. He desired to get the Gospel to new places and new people, so that unbelieving eyes and ears would be opened.

Paul did not simply say as a matter of fact there are people who don’t know the Lord here. Rather, he said there are people here who have yet to know Christ. He was hopeful, optimistic, expectant. Acts 18:9-10—“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”

Acts 28:15-18—“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

New church plants reach a whole new demographic that other existing churches don’t. This is why we send and replicate. Like a pebble in the water, a new church plant committed to church planting can spawn a church planting revolution reaching the secular corners of our country and the unreached people there. **It is too small a thing** to prioritize fellowship here, we must also prioritize sending and planting there. Then there will be more fellowship, more worship, more discipleship, more evangelism, and more planting. A church that is not passionate about sending and planting is missing out one of the most effective missional strategies to mitigate the decline of Christianity in the West.

## CONCLUSION

**Why New England?** The statistics for New England are even more critical than the rest of the country. Every year a list comes out of the top ten secular, post-Christian, unchurched states. The six New England states are invariably on that list. In 2008, the Northeast emerged as the stronghold of the religiously unidentified. Al Mohler responded, “To lose New England struck me as momentous.” The battle rages more intensely in different places and among different people. The secularization is both **geographically and generationally focused**. Some say New England is less than 3% Evangelical. The director of the Gospel Coalition in New England says we need another 10,000 churches to give every New Englander a

chance to meet another Bible believing Christian. Passion for church planting develops out of a strong sense of need. The need for cross-cultural planting in New England is great.

**We are in a spiritual battle. As our country grows to be increasingly secular and increasingly hostile to Christianity, we must realize that we are in a spiritual battle.** And as in any war strategy is necessary for survival and victory. Today marks the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day. We remember the brave men from the U.S., Canada, and France who courageously stormed the beaches of Normandy. But those brave boots on the ground could never have gotten to the beach without Higgins Boats called LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle, personnel). Crucial to the Allied victory on the European Western Front was this small, platoon-sized landing craft. General Eisenhower said, “Andrew Higgins ... is the man who won the war for us. ... If Higgins had not designed and built those LCVPs, we never could have landed over an open beach. The whole strategy of the war would have been different.” Those small LCVPs were transported or sent by larger ships. Planting small churches in secular, post-Christian regions is the best solution to the current crisis in America. Small churches need larger churches to send and support them. Size doesn’t matter, we both have the same mission and the same sovereign Lord and the same invincible Gospel. What we need is more bigger churches and smaller churches working together. We need churches willing to send and individuals willing to be sent. We need churches willing to spend and individuals willing to be spent.

**Why would we send out faithful leaders and families?** Won’t that hurt our church? Sending is what we’ve been called to. We are to have a Gospel impact that resembles Acts 1:8—from Simi, to California and the U.S. to the ends of the earth. Our mission is not to build our own kingdom or empire here at this church. We can’t repeat the mistakes of the past by huddling together, building a kingdom, and refusing to spread out. This is not the Tower of Babel, this is the church. **We want to build out, not up.** We want the light of God’s glory to go out. We want the nations to know him. We want our nation to know him. And the only way we do that is to send. Although separating and sending seems **counterintuitive**, but we know that division actually causes more life. When it comes to the human race, we know that reproduction is vital to survival. In horticulture, we know that pruning allows for more healthy growth. In biology, we know that cells replicate and divide for more growth. In the Gospel we know that sacrifice precedes resurrection. Reproduction is vital to the existence of the church. Does it come at a cost? Is it a sacrifice? Absolutely. But it is worth it. Not only will the unreached be reached, but the sending churches will become more vibrant with a renewed passion for local missions and new opportunities for new leaders to step up.

Dave Harvey wrote, “Not only do we have the same gospel Paul carried, but the spread of that gospel requires us to have a similar ambition to Paul’s, and to take similar risks . . . Having an ambition for the gospel pushes us to do things we never expected. It incites us to look beyond the borders of our comfort and convenience . . . God has designed the mission in a way that the gospel goes forward only through risk, cost, and sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup>

God has called us to do challenging things at inconvenient times and in difficult places. Christ is the ultimate example of a cross-cultural missionary. He left the glories of heaven for the people of earth. God sent Christ. So Christ sends us. Maybe God is calling you to leave the privileges of a large familiar church to plant in a difficult place. Let’s be open to his leading. John Piper says there are three kinds of Christians—zealous senders, zealous goers, and the disobedient.

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<sup>11</sup> Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 175.