

# CHURCH PLANTING WORKSHOP

*Sponsored by the Student Association of  
Mid-America Reformed Seminary*

25 April, 2008

*MJT 19 (2008) 223–232*

## SESSION ONE: HEART PREPARATION<sup>1</sup>

*by Paul Murphy*

I WOULD LIKE to make a couple of preliminary remarks with respect to the church growth which we've experienced. I think that most growth, both in the Christian Reformed Church and in the United Reformed Churches, has been biological and transfer growth. And I would like to *affirm* both of those. Usually you hear such growth treated pejoratively, but I would like to affirm them. Biological growth is consistent with the design of the covenant—that is, God works in the line of families, God is a God to us and to our children after us. On the American evangelical scene, the Dutch Reformed are the envy of the evangelical world because they keep their youth. I think that's due to catechetical instruction, Christian education, a strong connection between the church, the school, and the home—the three legs of our covenantal understanding. That leaves little time for aggressive programs of evangelism as we see in many evangelical churches. Of course, with the dispensational understanding of scripture, and the rapture mentality that is prevalent in American evangelicalism, the *only* thing that really matters is plucking brands from the fire, getting people saved, and getting them into the church. So you can have aggressive programs of evangelism; but when you have catechetical instruction, Christian education, and many other commitments as in our congregations, it doesn't leave a lot of time for evangelism programs. So biological

---

<sup>1</sup> This speech, and each of the speeches that follow, has been mildly edited, mostly removing matters extraneous to the substance of the topic. The editor, JMB.

growth is consistent with the designs of the covenant, and is a good thing.

With respect to transfer growth: if and when people come to Reformed convictions, it's okay for them to find a home in confessional churches. That's not a problem, it's a blessing. It should be seen as such.

Having affirmed both biological and transfer growth, which has been the primary means of growth in our churches, however, I hasten to add that they should not be the exclusive areas of growth. Matthew 28, the Great Commission, has been given to the church, and therefore we should be seeing growth from evangelism as well. That brings us to the subject that we're addressing here today.

I would like to begin by reading some scripture. John chapter 3 verse 16, then verse 17, and then over to chapter 20, verse 21. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave us his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The premise for everything I have to say to you today is that God is a missionary God. He so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. And as a missionary Father, he sent a missionary Son, verse 17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." How many times do we read in the gospel the purposes statements for which Jesus came? That is, he came not for the righteous, but to bring sinners to repentance. He came to seek and to save the lost. He is a missionary Son. And on to John chapter 20, verse 21, together the Father and the Son, of course, have sent a missionary Spirit. John chapter 20 verse 21, a post-resurrection appearance of the Lord here. Jesus appears to them and says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" It is an indication, a precursor, a harbinger of what is to occur on the day of Pentecost. Having ascended to the right hand of the Father on high, Peter tells us that he received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear. The point being, friends, is that God is a *missionary God*, who sent a *missionary Son*, who together sent a *missionary Spirit*, to, on Pentecost, equip, empower, and enable there to be a *missionary church*.

This is our identity; this is who we are. Evangelism and missions is not an elective module that can be taken or left out. Evangelism and missions is not something which is to be tacked on to the budget after we figure out where we're going to spend all our money on everything else. Now, there is no higher priority in the church than worship; we were created and redeemed to worship God, and we don't want ever to lose that emphasis or that focus. It is the ultimate reason, or *raison d'être* if you will, for the church's existence. But the penultimate purpose is most certainly missions, seeking and saving the lost. That is where we need, in my twenty years experience and exposure in our circles, some serious reformation. We're on the way towards that by having seminars like this here today. So it's encouraging.

1. *Let me now say some things in relation to heart preparation.* If, as I've stated, God is a missionary God who sent a missionary Son, who

together sent a missionary Spirit to have a missionary church, *then every church should be a missionary church*. That is, we need to do away with the distinction between a maintenance church and a missionary church. When I was first in Dutton, Michigan, I was contacted by a regional home missionary from another Reformed denomination. I found out that they were going to start a church about a mile away from Dutton. Well, looking at what Paul says in Romans that he sought not to build on another man's foundation, I thought that this was unethical at best, and certainly improper at worst. I said, "I hear you're starting a church. Do you know you're starting it a mile away from where an existing Reformed congregation has been for some 75 years?" His response was illuminating, but also, I think, indicting. He said to me, "This is going to be a different kind of church." I said, "Oh! What kind of church is this going to be?" He said, "Well, this is going to be a missionary church." I said to myself, *I thought every church was supposed to be a missionary church*; I said aloud: "I thought every church was responsible for seeking and saving the lost in their community; reaching them with the good news of Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life through faith in him." He said, "Oh well, you know, you're in a maintenance church and maintenance churches don't do that. We're going to be different."

This distinction actually exists in the heart and minds of our people. In my former denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, this was actually institutionalized (for a time) in the chapel system. There were churches that were considered chapels, where new converts or people that were "not our kind of people" and "didn't fit in" were sent. I think this is a kind of ecclesiastical affirmative action, a lowering of the standards to accommodate people that didn't have 500 years of Dutch Reformed tradition behind them. This attitude and distinction needs to change.

Here are some statistics which indicate the need for a change: Floyd Bartel, in his book *A New Look at Church Growth*, writes, "Ninety-five percent of all Christians in North America will not win one person to Christ in their entire lifetime." Bob Gilliam surveyed more than 500 evangelical churches in forty denominations (lack of evangelism is not just a problem for Reformed churches) over a ten-year period. Including more than 130,000 church members, his survey revealed that each year the average evangelical church led 1.7 people to Christ for each one hundred people in attendance. Shocking! Dr. Alister McGrath, speaking at Dallas Theological Seminary some ten years ago, noted that England in the eighteenth century was primarily a Christian nation. However, today only ten percent claim to be churched. (I think that's a vast overestimate, I think it is more like two percent.) McGrath warned that this was because the church stopped doing evangelism and focused its attention on teaching and the pastoral care of its members. I think that's something that we suffer from as well. We're very good at taking care of our own people; we're very good at preaching, teaching, and discipling youth. We're very good at raising children in the covenant, nurturing them in the faith, bringing them to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and never knowing a time when they don't know Jesus Christ as

Lord and Savior. But we are not good at reaching the lost in our communities.

In my estimation, we do missions by proxy; that is, we pay and pray for somebody else to do it. And this is something which should change. It should be the goal of every church to reproduce, because this is our identity. We are a missionary church.

2. *The second point I want to make is that witnessing or evangelizing or testifying, however you want to label it, is the responsibility of every Christian.* Now, if you're in a seminary that was founded for the purpose of promoting and preparing preachers, I want to add that I believe in, affirm, and agree with the special office of the Minister of Word and Sacraments. There is an official proclamation which is conducted by a minister when he stands in the pulpit, authorized by the church to speak for Jesus Christ when explaining and applying the Word of God. The Second Helvetic Confession says the preached Word of God is the Word of God. That's true. I don't want to diminish, dismiss, or denigrate anything with respect to that. But, in addition to an official proclamation of the gospel in preaching, there is an unofficial spreading of the gospel in evangelism. There is the minister who evangelizes when he preaches the gospel from the pulpit in the corporate worship assembly of God's people. But there are also the members who have that responsibility to witness. So there's preaching and there's witnessing. The minister in his official capacity when he preaches speaks *for* Jesus Christ; the preached Word of God is the Word of God. And yet a member is able to speak *about* Jesus Christ as well. And this ought to be something that is familiar to us from our catechetical instruction. In the Heidelberg Catechism, in Question/Answer 32, it asks, "Why are you called a Christian?" You will remember that in the previous question and answer, going through the Apostle's Creed, it asks, "Why is Jesus called Christ?" And it says "He is anointed with the Holy Spirit to be Prophet, Priest, and King." In its inimitable fashion, the Catechism immediately applies that to the hearers, and says "But why are you called a Christian?" It says, "Because I share in his anointing." And that is to be Prophet, Priest, and King—that is, every member, by definition innately, inherently, by definition of what it means to be a Christian, according to the Catechism, has a prophetic responsibility to speak about Christ.

Sadly in this tradition this has become somewhat distorted in some Church Order commentaries that I've read. This was referred to as the profession of faith ceremony when somebody actually made a transition into adulthood and made profession of faith in the congregation. I believe, in the strongest possible terms, that Ursinus and Olevianus were not referring to a profession of faith service. Rather, that every Christian, every member has a prophetic responsibility to speak for Christ, not officially, but unofficially. That is to be a witness. Brothers and sisters, I've run into far too many people in our congregations that never talk to anybody else about the faith, that never talk to anybody else about Christ, and we need to call that what it is: sin. And that's a hopeful thing, of course, isn't it? We don't seek to guilt-manipulate people, but we want to

call it sin so people can repent, and find forgiveness. There's hope in that, in restoration to the purposes that God has called us for.

A silent Christian, a non-witnessing Christian, somebody who has never told others about Christ or the faith, or the claims of Jesus Christ, is a contradiction in terms. It's sub-Christian. This is also in *Q & A #86* of the Catechism, when it talks about the necessity of good works. You know it's quite a long answer, but it ends by saying "so that our neighbors might see our good deeds and be won to Christ." It's a beautiful balance in the Catechism presented to us there, right? By lips *and* life, by word *and* deed we testify to others that it is Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself for me and purchased me with his own precious blood and has called me now to serve him, and to live for him and to witness for him.

It is very important to have our members involved in evangelism. Carl Henry has written of this personal element in evangelism: "A one-to-one approach initiated by every believer still holds the best promise of evangelizing the earth." Kenneth Scott Latourette, a Yale historian said: "The chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession. But men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion." Reverend Peter De Jong, who was a veteran missionary at home and abroad as well as a pastor, said: "One of the biggest handicaps to our local evangelism programs is often the indifference of our members to their missionary calling, and their failure to welcome those who do come into our worship from outside. On the other hand, one of the biggest factors in the success of winning these people has often been the interest of a Christian neighbor who tried to reach them, rather than the effects of a busy minister." We would do well to heed the observations of these men and steer away from relegating the task of evangelism simply and solely to professionals, whether that be in the pulpit or on the mission field.

Here are some statistics regarding this. The influences that lead people to eventually become members of churches are: Pastoral influence—3-6%; Sunday school programs—4-5%; special needs, maybe we would call them diaconal ministry—3-4%; visitation programs—3-6%; special programs—2-5%. Here's an interesting one: crusades and revivals—1/100<sup>th</sup> of 1%. This is a fascinating statistic on the effectiveness of crusades and revivals, despite what we hear about the thousands of decisions that have been made for Christ. But, note well, this last statistic: family and friends—75%.

This is a serious omission in the lives of our churches in my estimation. It's one of the main reasons, I believe, why we do not see outsiders converted to our congregations. To do evangelism, you see, is not just to spread information, but to save sinners. It's not just informing sinners, but inviting them. It's not just to lecture sinners, but to love them. Such evangelism is not harsh and callous, but concerned and courteous. Evangelism is to be warm-hearted, affectionate, considerate, and adaptable. It's not just to throw truth at people, but to get alongside them, start thinking with them and like them, speaking to them and with them.

Evangelism is an enterprise that springs forth from love. As Paul says, the love of Christ compels us. Since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. For Christ's love compels us.

This personal element is essential. Now, of course, this should not be done apart from seeing people come to church. This is something to be done in the covenant context of the church; not with lone rangers out doing their own thing, developing their own individualistic ministries or something. But it is something that is done in the context of the church. It's like the family. That is, family members go out every day to do different things each day. But each one of them is advancing the family's interests. And that's the same thing with respect to evangelism.

3. *This is something that needs to be inculcated and instructed in the church, requiring a change in the infrastructure of the church.* Allow me to give you a couple of suggestions for that. Ordinarily, when I do evangelism seminars, people get revved up and want to go back and program their church. I would discourage you from doing that. Don't program your church. Rather, program the hearts of the people in the church. That's what's needed, you see. People's hearts need to be inclined toward people, and sensitive to need.

If we're to change some infrastructure in the church, I would encourage you to aim for the next generation and take a long term approach. I'm fifty-four years old. I think most people in my generation and older have too much baggage. If they get it, that's great. But invest your time, your energy, and your efforts in the next generation. Take a long term approach. Start inculcating this in the minds and the hearts of the next generation.

In that next generation, send them to the field. I'm not talking about primary school kids, but high school students. We have groups from around the country come to New York City to do evangelism, and we train them in that. We take them out. We go door-to-door. We throw them in at the deep end right away. I tell people when they get there, "Tomorrow morning we're going door-to-door and you're going to have to talk to people about your faith. You're going to have to talk to people about Jesus Christ." It makes for a lot of all night prayer sessions. People get spiritual real quick. But I'll tell you, it's amazing because something like this is better caught than taught. The effect that this has had on churches, from groups that have gone back so excited to have talked to people about the faith, is wonderful. The kids get varying reactions from the people they meet in the city—everything from antagonism to a welcome reception. When they go back and talk about that it just lights fires.

Again, here's another infrastructure idea. Why not make it a "field-ed" component to the Christian education program of the church? Why not include it as part and parcel of catechetical instruction? Take people out to a church or a mission where the lost are being evangelized. Just go there; get out where missions are being done, where evangelism is being conducted, where people are actually talking to others about the faith. Let them see it, let them observe it, let them pray for it, let them be there, let them know what it looks like. I take my kids when we go door-

to-door. As a valuable lesson, I want them to see the folly of unbelievers when you ask them questions and they don't have any answers. I want them to see the nonsense that people talk about when they're without God and without hope in the world. You know, this is life. This is important.

Another infrastructure idea is to use both old and young in the church. In my experience, maybe it's different in your congregations, we put an unfair burden on people from thirty to fifty in the life of the church. We don't have any expectations of young people until they make profession of faith—and truth be known, well after that, that is until they have kids and get married. And then we start having expectations for them. We say we'll get so-and-so for deacon, and we'll get so-and-so for this committee. Well, no. We should use young people. They have all the energy. Let me tell you as a fifty-four year old, it's tiring doing this stuff, all right? Get them young'uns out there, you know? And senior people, get seasoned people involved. We constantly have problems getting officers in the church because people are off to Florida or Arizona or one thing or the other. The snowbirds say: "I put in my time." Or "I did my bit." Well, of course, if you have been doing everything from the time you were thirty to when you were fifty, then of course you're going to be burned out and not want to do anything when you get older. This should not be the case! Let's spread this out. Spread the responsibilities out more when it comes to this. Here are the people that are supposed to have all the wisdom, the knowledge, the experience in the church. And they're off snow-birding somewhere. This is an enormous asset the church is missing out on.

Another idea to change the infrastructure would be to pray from the pulpit. Pray for the lost. Pray for opportunities for the congregants to witness and to testify. Pray for the people to have eyes of faith so that when God brings open doors they see them for what they are. And pray for God to give courage to the people, boldness to speak up.

Include it in profession of faith class. We go through, in our profession of faith class or new members class, the rights and responsibilities of church membership. I always include an evangelism component for the young people making profession of faith, this is a responsibility. I'd ask them, "If being a Christian was a crime, is there enough evidence to convict you?" "Do people know you're a Christian?" "Or are you a silent Christian, just keep it to yourself?" See? It's every Christian's responsibility.

Missions and evangelism is an activity of Jesus Christ; and it is something that needs heart preparation—it demands our hearts and our heads. You need to keep this in mind as well. Missions and evangelism is an activity of Jesus Christ. We see this in Acts 1:1, of course, because Luke there writes, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach." The clear implication is that now in the book of Acts he's going to write about what Jesus continues to do and to teach. Where? In and through his church. So, it's the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ who is working in and through his church to take the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the uttermost parts of

the earth. It's Jesus, of course, who promises, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It's Jesus who spoke the words of the great commission, and said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, ... teaching and baptizing ... and lo, I will be with you always, unto the end of the age." So it's the *power* and the *presence* of Jesus Christ that's important in missions and evangelism. We're just his instruments. I find this enormously comforting and encouraging.

I'll speak later today about the disappointments of church planting ministry; yes, there are many. There are many times when you just want to hang your tail between your legs and put your head down and go home. I have to remind myself as I remind other people: This is the Lord's work. We plant, another man waters, but God has to give the growth. And it's that emphasis on the sovereign grace of God that is the most encouraging thing. The risen Lord Jesus Christ is building his church and he will add to it as he pleases and when he pleases. That's a great comfort; that's a great encouragement; and truth be known, it's a great motivation. Because then we just have to be faithful to what the Lord has called us to do. He has his sheep out there and they must come also, Jesus says in the Gospel according to John, chapter 10: "They must come." We're just out there finding where they are.

Be available to be used. And above all, don't let people be a hindrance to evangelism. I used to hear from certain people, "If people want to hear the gospel let them come to church." This is the mindset of some people now in our churches. *I like to call that the Great Omission.* The Great Commission is to "Go," not wait for them to "come."

4. *We must account for the difference between the first and the twenty-first centuries.* Far too many evangelicals in a biblicistic fashion turn to the book of Acts and think that you have all the answers in the book of Acts on how to do missions and evangelism. Well, sorry. Look at the book of Acts. They were in a pre-Christian era. People had never heard the gospel. God had been largely confined to the borders of Israel. Of course there were glimmers, there were indications, etc. etc., but by-and-large it was the nation of Israel. Now Jesus universalizes the gospel, "Go and make disciples of all nations." It's something new. These are people that had never heard; these are people that are hearing the gospel for the first time. It's a pre-Christian era. Well, that's not us. It's not us in America today. We live in what Chuck Colson has designated the new dark ages. We live in a post-Christian era. In America we live by-and-large among people who have heard the gospel and rejected it. When I go to people, even in New York City, which is an immigrant city, masses of immigrant population and many from non-Christian countries, the majority of people that I run into still have some sort of Christian or church background. When you talk about Jesus with them, they're not Buddhists; they're not pagans, although there are those of course. But the overwhelming majority of them have some Christian background. These are people who have heard the gospel, they know about Jesus. When you talk about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they know about the New Testament. Yeah, those are the gospels. They know what you're talking



about. But they've rejected it. These are not people who have never heard. That is a huge difference from what we find in the book of Acts.

Rather, these are people who have become resistant to the gospel. Like disease becomes resistant to medicine. So, the book of Acts is not what we ought to be looking at, but the Old Testament prophets are what we ought to be looking at. The Old Testament prophets went to a people who knew the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who knew the scriptures, who knew the temple sacrifices. But by-and-large they were disobedient and unbelieving. And the prophets are calling them on the basis of what they know to repent and believe and come back to the claims and demands of the covenant. The Old Testament prophets ought to be our model in America, not the book of Acts. It's not as if there's nothing to be learned from the book of Acts, but it's certainly not the norm.

5. *Beware of pragmatism. Beware of pragmatism in missions, evangelism, and church planting.* The question unfortunately for far too many is no longer, "Is it true?" but "Does it work?" Evangelistic methods in the church are secular, pragmatic, and pluralistic with tricks, tips, and gimmicks. People go to George Barna as the guru of church growth and evangelism. He writes books like *What Unbelievers Think*. It's instructive. The reason why people want to read books about what unbelievers think is so that we can become like them. But that becomes our undoing. In our congregation in New York, we have a theme which has been from the outset, and that is, "Make a difference by being different."

And we need to recapture and take seriously the doctrine of the antithesis in our missions and evangelism programs. Make a difference by being different. Don't succumb to pragmatism. It's very tempting to do that.

And let me tell you, strictness of faith does not equal failure in mission. There are far too many people, particularly among Reformed and Presbyterian people, who think that if you're going to do missions and evangelism you have to dismiss or downplay your Reformed distinctives. (There are people who want to hammer away on their Reformed distinctives but are not very winsome. I'm not advocating that. They are the kind of belligerent, bullheaded people that we don't want to be like. But we don't want to dismiss or downplay our Reformed distinctives.)

We must teach people what it means to be Reformed. These are the distinctives of the Reformed faith. These are things you'll find in this church that you're not going to find in most Christian churches; things that are unique to the Reformed branch of Christianity. And if done in a winsome and proper manner, when people get it, they love it. We have people get converted, come in, and sing the Psalms out of the Psalter Hymnal. We were doing that one night at Bible study and one guy looked up and said, "I love this book! This is great!" Somebody who had no familiarity with the Psalms and just loved it.

I would also encourage you not to lose confidence in the power of the gospel. Churches that grow are based on preaching. Now, I've talked to enough ministers in my twenty years of ministry to know there are many faithful ministers who don't always see that. But churches that grow serious Christians are going to be based on that. Don't lose confidence in

the power of the gospel. That's what Paul said in Romans chapter 1, he said "I am not ashamed of the gospel ... for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe." It's the power of God. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul says, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world." We don't need tricks, gimmicks, and manipulation. It's very tempting. Believe me, it's very tempting. Everybody wants to see church members added to the church. But we don't need it. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." If you lose confidence in the power of the preached Word; if you lose confidence in the power of the gospel, you will manufacture methods and manipulate people. What you win them with is what you have to keep them with. Don't succumb to that.