

PART 4: BOOK REVIEWS

A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams

Daniel Sinclair, (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005), 294 pages.

Available from www.authenticbooks.com & www.amazon.co.uk and such sources

Daniel Sinclair (pseudonym) served in the Middle East and then as field director for our sister agency founded by Greg Livingstone, overseeing hundreds of field workers across the Muslim world. This book is a practical manual on how to work in teams in order to plant churches. He tries to extend the principles beyond Muslims, to other unreached peoples, but his own experience and all of his examples are from the Muslim world context. The whole book bears the imprint of someone intimately experienced with the nuts and bolts of church planting *among Muslims*.

Dan covers a lot of ground and writes directly and engagingly. He treats most of the complex challenges that church planters face in the Muslim world. In addition to providing much practical advice on how to actually plant churches, he also explores key biblical principles and offers some helpful definitions and understandings of church planting in the New Testament.

I want to highlight three topics that I believe are particularly valuable for us in our ministries.

1. The need for apostolic gifting

Dan's opening chapter is devoted to exploring the question of apostleship (and he also has a ten-page study of apostleship in the New Testament as an appendix). He argues that the work of church planting is the essential apostolic ministry, and that the primary call of the apostles in the New Testament was to proclaim the gospel and

plant churches. He states emphatically that:

'Church planting' is newly in vogue in the church today, so we might be fooled into thinking it's a new concept. But in fact it is as old and as central as the Great Commission itself. It is exactly what all the apostolic teams of the New Testament did. They preached the gospel and then formed and matured *communities of faith*... Thus 'church planting among unreached people groups' would be a fair description of the New Testament concept of apostolic ministry (pp. viii & 4).

Though he strongly advocates the need for people with a wide variety of gifts on a church planting team, he suggests that unless there is at least *someone with apostolic gifting*, the team will not see a church planted. In situations of prolonged unfruitfulness in a team, he suggests that the team either needs to get a new team leader with apostolic gifting, or the team should split up and join other teams where there are some with apostolic gifting. He also offers some helpful and plausible definitions of what the apostolic gift entails, and how it operates.

2. How to lead a church planting team that plants churches

Dan has two very helpful chapters (10 & 11) that should be read by all team leaders and team members in any team seeking to plant churches. His discussion of what the team leader needs to do, and how to avoid getting bogged down in non-essential tasks, is very insightful. He is clearly speaking out of his

own struggles in being an effective team leader and his years of oversight of dozens of leaders of church planting teams. This is not merely about leading a team effectively, but about how to lead a team so that the team plants churches.

There is much discussion among our leadership at the moment about our church planting strategies. Some argue that we should see ourselves as church planting facilitators; others think that we should take the back seat to nationals and just help them plant churches. Dan's eleventh chapter 'The Role of the Church Planters in Church Planting' provides a good shot in the arm. It is a biblically based discussion of how the church planters ought to be involved in raising up leaders and mentoring the members of the first group of believers. Though not everyone will agree with him, I believe that much of what he says needs to be heard afresh.

3. Establishing the first group of elders

In his last chapter, Dan demonstrates biblically sound understanding of how to go about seeing a solid group of emerging leaders take on the leadership of the fledgling little church of believers from a Muslim background (BMBs). There is much wisdom here and everyone involved in the church planting process would do well to read and ponder his counsel.

In addition to these topics, Dan also addresses a number of other vital topics, including phases in church plants, learning the local language, tentmaking roles and identity, evangelism and discipleship (in which he has a short balanced discussion of issues that are driving many to C5 levels of contextualization, pp. 147-9), and church planting movements (a perceptive critique). So much of what he writes is uncomplicated

wisdom gained from hard experience. *This is the kind of helpful advice that so many of us wish we had had when we first started to try to plant churches.*

Conclusion: Assessing A Vision for the Possible

Are there any weaknesses in the book? At times I felt that I was reading more of a manual for church planting for members of our sister company, than for *everyone* engaged in the task, since the assumptions about how teams operate and how team leadership functions are so typical of our sister agency. Also, at times some of his attempts to provide biblical support for his approach seemed a bit simplistic, or stretching the original meaning of the text. But then again, Dan was trying to keep the book to a reasonable size and keep it practical.

These reservations aside, *I highly recommend this book.* This is a very useful handbook on actually getting on with the task of church planting written by someone who is clearly speaking from experience. It is an easy read and has quite a few links to helpful web-based resources. Yet, it is so much more than a how-to book, because Dan repeatedly stresses that we must rely on the Holy Spirit and minister in biblically appropriate ways in order to be assured of the anointing of the Spirit on our ministry. He constantly stresses that it is always the Spirit who does the work through us.

This is a book that every church planting team should read and discuss together, and it should also be read as part of orientation for new workers. If, through reading this book, we could learn even a quarter of what Dan is trying to teach us, I expect that the fruitfulness of our church planting ministries would measurably improve.

reviewed by Don Little