

The Role of the Cross-Cultural Discipler Within Traditional Pioneer Church Planting Approaches

by Don Little

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My Journey and Experience in Church Planting

Prior to moving to our city of residence in North Africa in 1988, I spent roughly three years getting started in standard Arabic, then French, and then colloquial Arabic. I arrived with limited ability to function in all three languages. In my first year in the city, I watched and listened and participated as a newcomer in a fairly large team. Arriving with a strong sense of having been *called to church planting*, I was eager to dive in and see God use me to help plant one or more local house churches.

A year after arriving, the opportunity to attempt to plant a church was presented to me when I was assigned to teach English at a new language center recently launched in a neighboring city. This was in a city of several hundred thousand people that had no known believers or house churches. For seven months I commuted to work in that city and

visited it for a whole day every Saturday as I sought to plant a church. When I left the country on home ministry assignment seven months later, there was a cell group of five men, all new believers who were meeting weekly for worship, Bible study, and prayer. I had hoped that this would eventually become the nucleus of a house church. Unfortunately, when I returned to the country about 2 years later, the group had disbanded as several members had moved to other cities for work, and no one had taken up the leadership of the church plant in my absence.

This experience illustrates the kind of role that most everyone arriving in North Africa in the 1970s through the early 2000s had in mind. We were involved, in whatever ways necessary, as members of teams which worked to plant local house churches. We all prayed and hoped these churches would mature quickly so that they would send out members to plant more such churches across the country, and even across the region. At the time my family left North Africa in 1998, every one of our agency's teams in the country were involved in key roles in planting house churches in almost every city.

About a decade later some within the organization, and within the wider missions community, began to suggest that cross-cultural workers should shift their strategy and focus their efforts on helping launch church-planting *movements*. And specifically, that we should do this rather than "merely" seeking to plant individual churches that would, we all hoped, multiply over time. I was part of the first training event on CPM run by our company in 2010. Though I whole-heartedly believe that God is able to raise up movements of churches planting churches among Muslim unreached peoples, from that very first training event, I have had serious reservations about many elements in the proposed shift in strategy away from *planting churches that multiply* to *launching church-planting movements*.

Appropriate Roles for Expat Disciplers

In my 2015 book on discipling BMBs, which drew on significant on the ground research among seventy-five church planters, I devoted one

chapter to discussing “Suitable Roles for Expatriate Workers” (chap. 15). I explored the three primary roles that the seventy-five disciplers whom I interviewed suggested were the most appropriate roles for expatriate disciplers: (1) be church planters, (2) facilitate church planting, and (3) serve under the leadership of local church leaders (hopefully Believers of Muslim Background). The reasons respondents emphasized different roles were often related to the context. In North Africa, where there were very, very few indigenous believers and churches, almost everyone agreed that it was crucial that cross-cultural workers called to church planting should be encouraged to exercise their gifting and calling, as long as they did so in close collaboration and communication with existing BMB churches and their leaders.

In contrast, in the Middle East, where there can be thousands, or tens of thousands of evangelical Christians, some felt that the best way for cross-cultural workers to contribute was by serving under local church leaders, doing whatever was asked of them. This view was expressed by many in that particular region, but it was by no means the only view. I have observed, far too often, that it is very difficult for Christians whose entire experience as believers has been as people oppressed and persecuted by Muslims, to get excited about planting churches of BMBs.

It is my belief that the kinds of roles that are most appropriate for cross-cultural workers to take on, within the broader pioneering aspect of the Great Commission, depend on two primary considerations. First, the nature of the calling and gifting that God has given to those he sends. And second, the nature of the ministry context(s) in which one finds oneself. Let me briefly illustrate.

When I was in my early twenties, while ministering and living in India, I took three days to fast and pray and seek God’s direction for his call on my life. I received a very clear word from God that he was calling me to plant churches among Muslims, and I sensed him leading me to undertake this ministry in the most unreached regions of the Arab world. I moved to North Africa ten years later in obedience to God’s clear call. Yet, the

nature of my *roles* in that endeavor were discovered in the course of ministry in North Africa. There I found that my primary ministry activities became leading regular Bible studies and spending extensive time in personal discipling of young men. And even now, though I have not lived in a Muslim country for twenty-three years, I view my current *role* as a missiologist, teacher, mentor, and trainer, as an ongoing fulfillment of the calling that God gave me forty-three years ago, to be involved in *planting churches* among Muslims.

Insights from Paul's Ministry for Cross-Cultural Church Planting

Throughout my years in North Africa and in the decades since then, the primary New Testament model and inspiration for this church-planting ministry continues to be the apostle Paul and his apostolic church-planting bands that we see so clearly in both the book of Acts and in all of his Epistles.¹ Jesus is the king of the kingdom that he inaugurated prior to his ascension, yet he leaves us no actual *model* or *example* of how to preach the gospel and plant churches. What he does give us is a great model on how to minister in the power of the Spirit, and how to train up a band of disciples in new kingdom communities. The two missions on which he sent first the twelve, and then the seventy-two, were short-lived missions of a few weeks which were essentially preparing the way for Jesus' coming visits to those towns. Those short training events were an important element in his pre-crucifixion, pre-resurrection, and pre-Pentecost announcement of the kingdom. Therefore, since the church was not birthed until Pentecost, it makes sense to look at *post*-Pentecost ministry reports as we seek New Testament models and examples for our own cross-cultural ministry.

1 A few years ago, when I was asked to give two keynote addresses for a consultation on church planting in our agency, I chose to give them on the apostle Paul as a model church planter and on lessons from Paul's church-planting ministry.

Some argue strongly that Paul did not plant churches, and that there is no command given in the New Testament to plant churches. I agree that there is no command given by Jesus, or by any other New Testament author to preach the Gospel and plant churches. However, even the most well-known version of Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28 strongly implies church planting. Where else can we obey his command to baptize believers and teach them everything that Jesus commands but in the context of a worshipping community of disciples?

Even though Paul never used the expression "church planting," it is crystal clear to me that Paul went from city to city, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and then setting up, organizing, and multiplying local house church congregations. Paul was not the pastor of any of those local churches. He worked in apostolic church-planting teams, and he appointed local leadership for the newly established churches. Paul's passionate love for the people in the churches he planted shines through everywhere.

Some would suggest that Paul is not a great model for cross-cultural church planting because he ministered in a world with which he was familiar and was already fluent in the languages that were used by the people. Yet, it seems to me that this misses the value of Paul and his example. Paul moved from city to city, from region to region and preached primarily to Gentiles, though he himself was Jewish, and he saw God raise up fellowships of local believers wherever he went. It was the task of those local churches to continue what he had begun and to preach the gospel to all the surrounding villages, towns, and cities.

Of course, when one is crossing major cultural and linguistic barriers, it often takes a much longer time in the early stages, as cross-cultural apostolic workers must immerse themselves in the language and culture of the people. But the approach is still the same, to recruit and lead a team of people who will preach the gospel and ask God to raise up local churches which will take on the ongoing task of preaching and planting churches throughout the region. The model that Paul gave us

is an inspiring and instructive model of the apostolic ministry of planting churches among unreached peoples.

Lessons from the Ministry of Paul

There is an unending source of insight, challenge, and instruction from Paul and his ministry found in the pages of the New Testament to guide everyone seeking to be cross-cultural disciplers in the twenty-first century. What practical implications might this picture of church planting seen in Paul and the pages of the New Testament have? I believe there are many profound lessons that can be applied directly to cross-cultural church-planting ministry today. Here are a few examples.

(1) The planting of churches is the fruit of the proclamation of the gospel (regardless of the form of that communication: preaching, inductive Bible studies, friendship and sharing, discovery studies, etc.). Evangelism is the cornerstone of church planting. As J.D. Payne says, in his helpful little book *Apostolic Church Planting*, “Biblical church planting is evangelism that results in new churches” (2015, 24). We often get side-tracked with debates about the biblical *form* of proclamation, with some arguing that *preaching* is what is meant when we think of proclamation.

Yet Paul helps us even here, in that the reports in Acts are that he dialogued with people, debated with others, preached to some in the synagogues, and—how can one not envision—sitting and talking with his clients hour after hour in the marketplaces as he made tents and awnings in his tent-making business. Proclamation of the gospel was even then accomplished in diverse ways.

(2) The work of church planting must always be undertaken under the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit, since he alone empowers the planting of churches as he bears fruit in the hearts of people to the truth of the gospel proclaimed, shared, or discovered. In several places we get insight into how utterly dependent Paul was on the leading and anointing

of the Holy Spirit. As Paul stressed in 1 Corinthians 3, he planted the seed, but it was God who gave the increase; it was God who confirmed the message in the response of those who heard, which led to churches being planted. All of us are utterly dependent on the sending, guidance, and anointing of the Spirit of God.

(3) The churches planted do not belong to the planter, but to Christ, and they must be locally led and shaped in locally and culturally appropriate ways from the outset. We do not plant “our own” churches. The churches are always Christ’s churches. Perhaps that is why Paul did very little of the baptizing. We are not told who did the baptizing, but it seems likely that in Paul’s ministry those who came to faith baptized others who came to faith. Is that also part of the reason why Paul would never accept money for support from the churches he planted? He wanted to make sure that the churches did not feel beholden to him! They were not his churches, but Christ’s (2 Cor. 11:5–10).

(4) We who are called to cross-cultural church planting must recognize, seek out, train, and affirm apostolically gifted individuals and local disciple makers, to take the lead in such church planting as soon as the local church is birthed, as Paul clearly did. It appears in Acts and in the letters of Paul, that once there were local churches of any size, he immediately handed on the leadership of those churches to local believers, and he recruited and trained some of those local believers to become apostolic church planters as well.

In recently published ground-breaking research into what catalyzes contemporary CPMs around the world, Emanuel Prinz (2021) makes a compelling case that it is apostolically called and gifted *people* whom God uses far more than particular CPM *methods*. Paul models for us this ministry dynamic: he identified, trained, and sent local believers into Apostolic ministry, sometimes within just a few months of their conversion.

(5) As we follow Paul's model of apostolic leadership, we will be humble; we will elevate others—particularly women—into key roles, and we will keep recruiting local believers and training them to become apostolic ministers to their own people and beyond.

Though I am aware that many still hold to a common traditional understanding that men are to lead in churches and in church-planting ministry, I find it compelling that much recent scholarship notes that Paul worked quite extensively with women. We see Priscilla, along with her husband, with whom Paul worked as a co-laborer in the gospel, discipling Apollos (Rom. 16:3-4; Acts 18:26). Then there are his co-laborers in the gospel, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3). And we have Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), to whom it seems Paul entrusted to bring his epistle to the church in Rome, and likely interpret it for them as well. And we cannot forget Junia who Paul calls an apostle, who was imprisoned along with him for their apostolic ministry (Rom. 16:7). And finally, there are the three other women, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis, whom Paul singles out for praise as having worked hard "*in the Lord*" (Rom. 16:12). Just as Jesus acted counter to his culture in having a whole group of women travelling with him and ministering to his needs, Paul, too, appears to have violated cultural norms in working with women in his team. He went so far as to have planted the first church in Macedonia (where he went in response to a vision) in the home of Lydia, who was likely a single businesswoman.

Concluding Benediction

There are so many more profound lessons to be learned from the apostle Paul, as Roland Allen (1912) first made us aware of more than a century ago.² May God continue to call and gift men and women by the thousands, who have similar levels of Holy Spirit empowered anointing

2 In such books as *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours? The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, and *Missionary Principles*.

as we see in Paul and so many of his team members and co-laborers in the gospel, to engage in both cross-cultural and same or near-culture apostolic evangelism, disciple-making, and church planting.

Questions for Discussion

- What is the biblical and experiential rationale for Don's perspective on appropriate roles for expatriate church planters? Do you agree with Don's rationale?
- What practical insights do you glean for your context from Don's research and reflections?

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