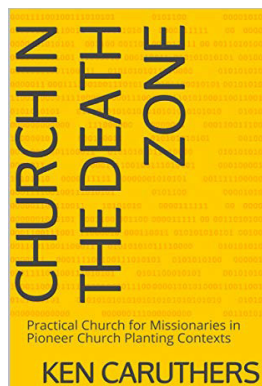


Church in the Death Zone: Practical Church for Missionaries in Pioneer Church Planting Contexts

By Ken Caruthers

Self-Published, 2014. 198 pages.

Reviewed by J.F.



J.F. moved as a tentmaker to one of the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula over 15 years ago with his wife and four children, after Arabic study and ministry among Arab Muslim immigrants in the United States, his homeland. The slow responsiveness of nationals led to diverse avenues and partnerships towards their aim of church planting among locals.

Introduction

Ken Caruthers' book, "puts the church back in church planting" (144). Where did it go, you ask? How could our church planting strategies be missing the church? Caruthers seeks to correct a gap in practitioners' applied ecclesiology as a team while in the process of planting a church. He proposes "CPAC" (Church Planting as Church) as a model for teams to function themselves *as a church*, defending it as a more biblical model than "team," and promoting many benefits for the church planters, their ministry, and the sending agency.

Being a "practical" model (see the subtitle), the targeted audience of this book is everyone in missions influencing team church planting in a pioneer context. Such a context implies that it will take an extended

period of time after arrival of the missionary to plant an indigenous church because of the significant difference in language and worldview of the team's home culture. The author's concern is that many church planters neglect church for themselves during this period.

This self-published book appears to be Caruthers's dissertation for a PhD in missiology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the USA. The work's 771 footnotes (containing numerous gems) and 29-page bibliography demonstrate Caruthers's thorough research and exemplify its depth. This work lacks the polish of a book prepared for publishing ("Death Zone," from the title, is never mentioned). In spite of these drawbacks, I was drawn into the book and interacted with it extensively, having wrestled in my own life with many of the ideas of the boundaries of church, team, and the BMB (Believers from Muslim Background) church.

An American, Caruthers had previously served on a church planting team to Muslims in Central Asia, and then led teams engaging Central Asians in five countries. The author's missiology promotes a healthy contextual hermeneutic to ensure a planted church reflects the national culture and is not a mere plant from the sending culture.

Contents and Development: You Need the Church

Chapters and sections are structured and supported in a way that make it easy to follow the argument for his thesis, with effective summaries guiding the reader. His thesis "is that church planting missionaries identifying themselves as church is biblically permissible, has historical precedence, is theologically supported, and can be missiologically advantageous under certain circumstances" (4). Said in another way, "this dissertation is a call for all who are involved with missions to emphasize more explicitly the personal church experience of missionaries" (8). There are two background points for his thesis. The first is that despite going to pioneer locations with the goal of planting a thriving Christian

community among the nationals, the church life of the missionary on the field is often neglected. Some missionaries think being a member of a church in their home country suffices. The second background point is that business team theory—a prevailing influence on pioneer missions for the last 40–50 years—is biblically deficient at achieving Christian community.

CPAC is his practical solution.¹ Caruthers describes criteria for “church” biblically and theologically, both its structure and function. CPAC adequately fulfills the functional elements (worship, evangelism, serving, teaching, and fellowship). Caruthers examines Paul’s apostolic bands of fellow workers to ascertain the nature of their interrelationships, as well as his relationship with the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Paul’s field. This section encapsulates believers’ one-another obligations into the concept of church membership, which I find to be the weakest element of the book (critiqued below). Caruthers addresses an observed reality that many missionaries function in task-oriented teams without fulfilling the one another obligations of Christian community. “There is no biblical evidence that devoting oneself to a congregation of Christians is optional for believers” (61). CPAC would resolve this.

Historical Examples of Missions as Community

Caruthers surveys monasticism in the Middle Ages and the Moravians of the 18th century for examples of missions carried out in a community which is very churchlike, even though both groups had reasons not to consider themselves churches.

More recently, he discusses the takeover of missiological relationships by American business team theory starting in the 1970s. He identifies team theory as deficient and unbiblical as a foundation for planting churches. Team theory was advanced because it promoted cooperation

1 As a solution, the author is not prescribing team as church, nor proscribing participation of teammates in other available congregations. He discusses scenarios of CPAC morphing into indigenous church or maintaining a separate identity.

and performance. However, it values task in a way that promotes individualism, pragmatism, and an arbitrary morality. Even Christian literature does not critically evaluate business team theory with the authority of Scripture.

Theological Support: God's Image and Triune Nature Necessitate Christian Community

The relevance of the image of God to church-planting teams is that the relational dimension of the image of God in redeemed persons will not be on display in lone missionaries. A community fulfilling their one another obligations reveals the love of God in a way a lone Christian loving the lost does not. Caruthers's call to send a community (as a church) to plant churches conflicts with some agencies' priority of maximizing the number of numerous UPGs (Unchurched People Group) engaged by sending individual units to them. In apparent conflict with the urgency of sending someone to each UPG, sending a community ties up more missionaries for a longer time in one UPG as they overcome worldview/language challenges. Four times in the book Caruthers highlights that missionaries in pioneer locations "need even more pastoral care" (110) than many other believers. He provides convincing reasons "to send church planters in groups" (111) and not as lone rangers.

The communal nature of the Trinity strengthens his call for church planting in community as a church. Aware of the individualism of the American context, Caruthers highlights the necessity of living the Christian life in community. "However, it would be difficult for Christians to live outside of ecclesial relationships and still maintain the Christian life that is portrayed in Scripture. There seems to be an indispensable ecclesial structure to the Christian life" (119).

These theological elements of the Trinity and image of God are brought together powerfully in a section on Christian community and *koinónia* fellowship. Lone ministry (or even exclusively task-oriented team ministry) is dangerous because the believer lacks the "reciprocal giving

and receiving of *koinónia*,” which God uses to display his glory. “*Koinónia* can only be cultivated in the church and only primarily so in the local church” (129). *Koinónia* is God’s means for our own growth and provides a context for worship, a picture for evangelism, and pastoral care to reduce attrition. Caruthers noted that agency attempts to reduce missionary attrition surprisingly made no reference to involvement in a field-based local church as a solution. Attrition could be reduced if missionaries experienced such Christian community on the field.

CPAC Compatible with Church-Planting Strategy

Building upon the foundation of biblical, historical, and theological permissibility for the CPAC model, Caruthers applies the strategy to the church-planting phases. He shows CPAC to be not only compatible, but advantageous. Although the church for national believers will be significantly different from their home church experience, the CPAC model allows the team to be better prepared for challenges in the church plant as they “put their ecclesiology into practice, thereby testing its contextualization” (154). Besides mere compatibility, “the model intentionally keeps ‘church’ and ‘church planting’ tied together better than some of the other models” (158).

Wrestling with the Church on the Field

I have a unique missiological situation, ministering to a resistant, unreached people in their homeland with a significant worldview and linguistic distance from us, but surrounded by multiplying gospel-preaching expatriate churches.² Some leaders of these churches have also articulated Caruthers’s concern that many missionaries who were in the region for church planting do not seem to value the local (expat) church

2 While these churches would welcome nationals, there is no active engagement to plant indigenous fellowships. The nationals must take initiative and are required to go the cultural and linguistic distance required for exposure, comprehension and participation.

that already exists in the Arabian Peninsula (AP). At times we were in the crossfire.³

Relevant to this review, I have served as an elder in a sending church and an Arab church pastored by a BMB, both in the United States and in an international church on the AP. Some teammates and I also practiced the CPAC model (before reading this book) for a few years in a house church, wrestling with its exclusive nature of focusing on the neighbors and not welcoming other expats.

While I agree wholeheartedly with Caruthers's conclusion about the need for missionaries on the field to experience the functions of the church he described, I found one aspect of the development of his argument unhelpful. His chosen definition for church membership was very conceptual and presented without an exegetical defense of its demands.⁴ His application of it as a metric to evaluate Paul's relationships with the churches was anachronistic and a form of eisegesis. Caruthers's definition represents only a subset of his denomination, seminary, and agency, not the broader evangelical community. I have observed unintended consequences in some churches where the comprehensive application of this philosophy undermined the fulfillment of the biblical obligations of one another commands and koinónia fellowship he describes. These latter terms more effectively describe the Christian life in community than church membership. "Fellow worker" more accurately describes the relation of teammates than "church member." Paul's ministry relationships highlight that the boundaries of a local church do not limit the extent of whom we carry out one another commands with.

Finally, it is important not to overpromise the witness of *church* when

3 I encouraged involvement in an expat church in a context like ours in my article "Discipling and Church Planting through One's Church and Family" *Seedbed*, 23:2, 2009.

4 "a covenant union between a particular church and a Christian, a covenant that consists of the church's affirmation of the Christian's gospel profession, the church's promise to give oversight to the Christian, and the Christian's promise to gather with the church and submit to its oversight." Jonathan Leeman. 2010, 53. Crossway. "*The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*".

one primarily has its gathering in mind. Our love for one another is not on display in a worship service but in the neighborhood and community.

Recommendation

Ken Caruthers effectively identifies a neglect of the role of *church* by those on the field for church planting and within missiological literature. It is not a commendation to our community that this book needed to be written! This topic is worth wrestling with. I recommend his book for missiologists, member care specialists, and mission leaders (from mission pastors to team leaders) who shape strategy for teams. Missionaries on the field are not exempt from the need for ongoing pastoral care and one-another discipleship. For those who fear that this is merely another team burden, I make this plea: do not envision CPAC in terms of the labor-intensive service of an American church supported by staff, programs, building, band, a choreographed meeting, and 20–30 hours of preparation for a polished sermon. The meeting-related functions of a church can be legitimately meaningful even when simple.

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