

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT IS NEEDED TO ESTABLISH A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

This chapter will concentrate on the human elements required. They are considered in the light of the full realization that the Church cannot be humanly established. Apart from the Holy Spirit's working, no New Testament church ever has or ever will be planted.

First of all, there must be effective evangelism and discipleship. The whole will not be stronger than its component parts. Conversion in this part of the world is more often a process than a crisis. This makes the church-planting process more complex than it appears to be in other areas of the world. Whatever its visible manifestation, conversion must result in realization of forgiveness, receiving of spiritual life, and meaningful committal to the Lordship of Christ.

Discipleship must produce, not only a knowledge of the Word, but also strong inter-personal relationships among believers, and a spirit of discipling others. Without these features a church will not continue long to function independently of the church-planter.

Secondly, there must be sufficient stable and stabilizing elements to keep the church from disintegrating. A nucleus of families is one of these elements. A core group with solid inter-personal relationships is another. Financial independence for enough of the members to make the group economically viable is another. A sufficient leadership core to fulfill the pastoral needs of the church is another. The church-planter or church-planting team often provides this stabilizing factor in the beginning. The danger is that the church will become permanently dependent on this team. Until such elements are flourishing within the group apart from the church-planter, his task is yet incomplete. Expatriate church-planters seemed to provide the chief stabilizing factors in the church in Algiers for nearly ten years. Had they had to leave before like elements from the national group began to function effectively, their church-planting mission would have aborted, or would have had to be taken over by someone else.

Thirdly, correct attitudes must be developed and maintained both in the church-planter and in the church group. As to the former, the following are essential:

- 1) Solid commitment to the goal of a church functioning independently of himself. Without this commitment it is too easy to become by default the permanent pastor of the group, short-circuiting the church's development and side-tracking one's own ministry of planting churches. It could be advantageous to assign church-planters to an area for a limited period, say five years, at the end of which they should expect to have a group ready to continue functioning without them.
- 2) Single-mindedness in pursuing the goal. There are a multitude of valid and important ministries that the church-planter can become involved in. Without a careful setting and maintaining of priorities in light of the goal, one will soon find his energies and time diverted to other very pressing needs. This is increasingly important as more and more expatriate church-planters are functioning in secular jobs as their basis for residency in Arab-Muslim lands and therefore time and energy available for church-planting are in increasing short supply.
- 3) Perseverance. Very particularly in the Arab-Muslim world is this quality essential. Near the beginning of my career in North Africa, a young contemporary said as he prepared to leave the field after less than one year, "I just don't believe that there will ever be a significant turning from Islam to Christ, and don't intend to sink my life into a lost cause." We are still in the Arab-Muslim world after more than 25 years of relatively little harvest, sustained by belief that the breakthrough for the church in these lands must come. To date the process has been complex and long-term. We long and hope continually for that mighty moving of the Spirit of God, which will bring years of effort to fruition in days and will cause churches to spring up in multiple areas of our field. Whether that takes place next week or next year or in the next decade, we are called to persevere in prayer and preparation for the planting of churches according to God's tempo and program.
- 4) Dependence on God and the working of His Spirit. The moment we begin to depend on our gifts, our efforts, our methods, we will cease to function effectively as church-planters. Only as we maintain the attitude of being agents and stewards of God, totally dependent on His working, will we make progress in establishing true New Testament churches.

As the church-planter has right attitudes within himself, so he must inculcate, foster, and pray into being right attitudes on the part of those he is discipling toward the formation of the church. Over and above such attitudes as humility, dependence on God, love towards others, etc., which would be part of any discipleship program, the following are essential to church functioning:

- 1) Commitment to the body, the Church. Repeatedly in North Africa our discipleship programs have produced believers with strong commitment to the Lord, but weak or nil commitment to the Body. The result is a multiplicity of isolated believers, but no church, or a church severely weakened by lack of the gifts and ministries of those who have isolated themselves from its fellowship. Brother Ahmed has a stronger administrative gift than I have seen in any other Moroccan believer. But after a year of strong contribution he withdrew from the church. The lack of his gift leaves the group still floundering in its organizational life. We must emphasize commitment to the church as strongly as we do commitment to the Lord.
- 2) commitment to solve problems within the group, rather than to run from them or ignore them. I know a dear brother who has a twenty-year history of withdrawal and re-entry as concerns his local fellowship. He returns periodically and contributes very enthusiastically for a few weeks or months. Then something happens to upset or offend him and he drops out for a few months or years, only to reappear again one day as though nothing had happened. The greatest difficulty in local churches being established in North Africa is that of inter-personal relationship problems. A covering over of such and pretending that they are not there saps the vitality of the group. A withdrawal from them rather than solving them results in continual disintegration of the critical mass. There must, therefore, be solid commitment to living out the principles of Matt. 5:23,24 and 18:15-18.
- 3) Commitment to continuing function as a church in the face of opposition and persecution. Unless the corporate identity and function of the church take priority over personal safety, a Muslim-convert church in today's Arab-Muslim world will not stand. Level of functioning may become more low-key, certain group activities may be stopped for a period, or carried on in smaller groups. But there must be a strong commitment to function as a body or the corporate identity will disappear under pressure. In the early 1970's the church in Casablanca met under appointed national leadership in a semi-public evangelistic hall. Policemen invaded the hall, haled the leaders to the police station for interrogations, and forbade them to continue meeting. A short time later, the church re-grouped in an expatriate missionary home. In 1982, the expatriate meeting place became too vulnerable and the group decided to begin meeting in different national homes, meeting in two different groups each week, each group rotating among different homes, so as to lower the profile as much as possible. At this point expatriates ceased attending the meetings for security reasons. In 1984, during a period of widespread repression of known or suspected Christians, all regularly organized meetings were disbanded. This is obviously not ideal for church development. But the corporate identity had been maintained, even during this period, by personal visits and impromptu times of Bible study, prayer and fellowship.