



### **The Church Planter Trifecta**

*How Can I Know if God is Calling Me To Plant a New Church?*

By: Clint Clifton

Watching church planters come on the scene reminds me of my favorite hometown pastime, visiting the public pool. My buddies and I would hike to the pool in our city for hours of unsupervised leisure. The best part of visiting the pool was watching the endless string of prepubescent divers rocket from the spring-loaded diving board perched four feet above the water's surface. Some would hit the water as graceful as an Olympian while others ended their display with a painful belly flop or a Greg Louganis<sup>1</sup> style smack to the head. Planting a church without considering *The Church Planter Trifecta* could mean years of misery for you and those who have the misfortune of attending your church. Failure as a church planter is a very painful way to assess your fitness for the job.

I remember once telling a friend that I believed God was calling me to start a new church. Before even hearing me out, my friend said, "If you can imagine yourself doing any other type of work and enjoying it at all, you should do it" I spent a lot of time thinking about what my friend said before coming to the conclusion that no other pursuit was an option for me. I had a sincere aspiration to the office (1 Tim 3:1), met the Biblical qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9 & 1 Peter 5:1-4), and was affirmed and sent out by the leadership of my local church. This is *The Church Planter Trifecta*.

I have met a lot guys who want to start new churches. Usually, these men are already in ministry. Maybe it's a restless youth pastor who is sick of babysitting teenage reprobates, or associate pastors who are hoping to take the next step up in the ministry ladder. Sometimes, it's a senior pastor willing to hand his sheep over to the neighborhood wolf because of their waywardness; and sometimes a church planter emerges from the secular labor pool. Desperate for a more sacred occupation, these men view ministry as the nearest off ramp from a job headed nowhere. Whatever the motive, the prospect of planting a new church becomes so alluring that these mini reformers can't give serious consideration to any other subject. Restlessness, passion, and frustration fuel their desire to dive in to ministerial leadership.

Don't get me wrong, restlessness, passion and frustration have served to start many great movements, but they haven't done it alone. If God has called you to plant a new church or revitalize an old one, you should seek the *Church Planter Trifecta*. A "trifecta" is a perfect score, three shots in a row from the

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<sup>1</sup> American Olympic diver who he suffered a concussion after hitting his head on the springboard during the preliminary rounds of the 1988 Seoul Olympics while performing a reverse 2 1/2 pike.

free throw line, or three perfect predictions at the racetrack. If you are considering planting a new church or revitalizing an old one, you need a perfect score in at least three areas before taking the plunge.

## **Aspiration**

Before the apostle Paul began his list of qualifications in 1st Timothy 3, he makes a simple observation: “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” The Greek word translated “aspire” means “to stretch yourself out in order to grasp for something” and the word “desire” means to “long for” or “lust after”. Paul is saying that to be fit for this job, we have to stretch for it and lust after it. God is a master at producing desire where there once was apathy. The same God that wired men to desire women, and sharks to desire blood will grant you a voracious appetite for the establishment and renewal of the local church. The psalmist felt this passion when he said “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.” Peter and John felt it when they said to their captors, “we cannot stop speaking of what we have seen and heard.”

Sadly, this man has vacated the modern pulpit and has been replaced by the dignified professional pastor. “Professionalism has nothing to do with the essence and heart of the Christian ministry. The more professional we long to be, the more spiritual death we will leave in our wake. For there is no professional child-likeness, there is no professional tender-heartedness. There is no professional panting after God.”<sup>2</sup> Is it your aspiration to make Christ known, or is it simply to be known?

The life of a churchman is a life of service and sacrifice. John the Baptist is a perfect example of this. His life was marked out for one simple self-proclaimed purpose, “to prepare the way of the Lord.” John squandered his entire ministry on the unveiling of Jesus. In fact, the scripture makes clear “He is not the light” (John 1:8) “He is not the Christ” (John 1:20) “Are you Elijah?” he was asked, “I am not.” - “Are you the prophet?” “No” he said (John 1:21). “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23). Just in case he had not adequately made his point, John the Baptist announced, “I am not even worthy to unstrap Jesus’ sandals.” (John 1:27) When Jesus arrived, all attention was turned from John. He was no longer famous and no longer in the spotlight. Then, at the moment when John was completely upstaged by Jesus, John says, “My joy is now complete.” (John 3:29)

It makes me think of the theater. Have you ever seen the man who draws the curtain? No. He hides away in the darkness so he doesn’t distract your attention from the stage. If he reveals the stage and hides himself he has done a good job. If your ministry is fruitful, Jesus will stand center stage while you are hidden in the shadows. If this is the life that you long for, consider one third of *The Church Planter Tripecta* achieved.

## **Adequacy**

There are some who refuse to apply the Biblical qualifications for an elder to the church planter because the two jobs are not the same. I agree they’re not the same. The job of a church planter, though not

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<sup>2</sup> Piper, John, “Brothers We Are Not Professionals” p. 1

the same, certainly includes the jobs of shepherding and oversight. For this reason, a church planter should meet the Biblical qualifications of an elder. The Bible cites no less than 26 qualifications for the elder. The scripture is explicit that these are essential qualities of the man of God who will lead a local congregation. So my first suggestion is that you carefully and prayerfully study 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9 & 1 Peter 5:1-4. After you study, take time to compare the Biblical qualifications to your life.

The primary difference between the task of pastoring an established church and beginning a new one is that church planting requires a great deal of initiative. Now don't get me wrong, those who lead established churches should also possess initiative, but in an established church, a new pastor can maintain an existing ministry with little or no new initiative. Imagine the life of a pastor six months into his job at an established church. All week long he studies for his sermon, prays for his people, talks with committee heads, has a staff meeting, and makes hospital visits and phone calls. Then Sunday comes; 200 people show up, hear a great sermon, good music, and you as the pastor leave feeling that the day was a success. Now, let's imagine spending your week the same way as a church planter. You share the gospel with no one, you invite no one new to church, you spend little to no time with lost people, and you train no one. You study, pray, and prepare; then Sunday comes and your room is empty. You feel like a failure, all your perpetration for nothing. You leave discouraged.

Your fitness for this job will depend both on your attention to the qualifications that the scripture requires you to fulfill as a pastor and the initiative you employ as an evangelist. This is true for both those who plant, and those who revitalize churches. Revitalization requires an equal level of initiative. Until you have properly equipped the saints for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12), you are the work of the ministry. As the size of your congregation grows, so does your responsibility to equip those under your care. The wise churchman will pay close attention to this shift and manage his time accordingly. If you meet the biblical qualifications and possess the necessary level of initiative, then consider this two thirds of *The Church Planter Tripecta* achieved.

### **Affirmation**

Finally, the church is the indispensable final third of the trifecta pie. If you are a church planter it is vital that you understand that the local church is the means by which God will expand His kingdom. Denominations and parachurch organizations are tremendous resources for the church planter and should be utilized to the extent that they are helpful; but these organizations should never replace the local church as central authority in the establishment and renewal of the local church. You should seek help from godly individuals who know you well. Employ those who will be honest with you about your weaknesses and ask them difficult questions, such as "Do you consider me to be self-controlled?" "Do you think I am a good manager of my household?" Listen to the answers they give and get a consensus on any areas that you are unsure about.

Many planters today don't want a close relationship with a mother church because they worry that the relationship will somehow stifle what God has called them to. This is like a child refusing to take instruction from his parents but continuing to accept an allowance. A church planter needs the guidance, wisdom, and assistance a mature congregation, and a faithful body of leaders to help make difficult decisions and guide the wild heart of a church planter. It has become increasingly popular to gather the monetary support of several local churches while accepting instruction from none of them. The church planter should only consider planting when the leadership and congregation of his local church commission him to do so. You might ask, "What about those who are not part of a healthy local church?" It is especially essential for them to join a healthy fellowship before planting. Many planters confuse the call to plant a new church with the restlessness they feel as a part of an unhealthy one. The man in this position should re-align himself with a healthier congregation and seek to live out his passion through the ministry of that church. If no such church exists the church planter must assemble a team of Godly men to submit himself to.

Your spouse can also be of great help to you. I remember once I gave my wife a description of four types of Christian men; the slug, the Ant, the Bear, and the Dog. I described each of them in great detail so that she could easily identify me. I asked her to be honest and tell me which one I most resembled. I was shocked when she described me as an "Ant" whose good deeds and religious piety monopolize his life leaving no room for his ministry in the home! Ouch. My perception of my self and my wife's perception of me were totally different. As a part of the church and one who knows you well, allow your wife the freedom to confirm or deny your fitness to the office.

If your church affirms your fitness and calling to the office *The Church Planter Trifecta* is complete. Let your confidence be overshadowed only by your humility as you step onto the springboard.

#### **Questions for Consideration:**

1. Could your aspiration to be a church planter be described as a "lust" for the job? Describe your desire to plant a new church.
2. Is it possible that your desire to plant a church has primarily to do with a discontentment with your current situation? How can you be sure?
3. What are some of the ways you have "stretched" yourself to reach for the opportunity to serve as a church planter?
4. What other stretching do you anticipate will be required from you in order to start a new church?
5. Are there any qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9 & 1 Peter 5:1-4 that you believe disqualify you from planting and pastoring a church?

6. List two or more of the qualifications that you should focus your attention on improving?
7. Do you believe that you possess the initiative necessary to plant a new church?
8. Name two close friends that you will employ to assist you in comparing your lifestyle to the one required for an elder in the passages listed above.
9. What does the statement, "Until you have properly equipped the saints for the work of the ministry, you are the work of the ministry" mean?
10. Have you shared your desire to plant a new church with the leadership of your church? If so, describe their reaction.
11. Are you willing to submit yourself to the leadership of your current church until you have established governance in your church plant?
12. On a scale of 1-10 what is your spouse's level of support of your desire to plant a new church? What major concerns does she have?