

# THE CHURCHES OF THE FIRST CENTURY

FROM SIMPLE CHURCHES TO COMPLEX NETWORKS

**JEFF REED**

*President and CEO, BILD International*

*Presented at 2009 BILD Summit*

*Ames, Iowa*

*November 5, 2009*

A BILD ENCYCLICAL

© 2015 Jeff Reed. All rights reserved.

Special thanks to Northland: A Church Distributed in Orlando, Florida, for their participation and support of the BILD Encyclicals publishing project, which produced the six booklets in this series.

Published by BILD International in Ames, Iowa.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9910852-3-1

Printed in the United States of America

## Introduction

These encyclicals were written in real situations. They were written to our own network of churches, in which I serve as the apostolic team leader. They were written to our own partners in the Global South—complex apostolic networks—that we now have in all nine civilizations. They were written to our partner churches in the USA and to those we are recruiting as partners. And they were written to the Church at large, including denominations, mission agencies, Christian training organizations and NGOs, major donors, and foundations. But they are situational. So as a result, I have left the stories in of how they unfolded—our local stories and stresses and stories of our partners and mentors’ contributions. The Church at large may feel like an outsider at times, but the situational context is important.

In a way, the six encyclicals form a fairly complete New Testament theology—what I call a “situational N.T. Theology.” It is not set forth propositionally, like out Western systematic and biblical theologies. These encyclicals are situational—theology embedded in the real life times of paradigm change. It may feel very different, but it is patterned after the New Testament itself, which is a “situational document.” God did not give us a “theology textbook”; He gave us a situational New Testament. We are the ones who replace it with doctrinal textbooks, to which all denominations are enslaved. Another way of describing these encyclicals is to call them a fairly complete “situational New Testament theology in culture.”

Why did I decide to call them *encyclicals*? Because they are documents intended to be circulated amongst the churches. But that sounds arrogant, because only the Pope writes encyclicals. I am no pope, but these are intended to be much more than just papers. (The full idea of encyclicals will unfold in the introduction to the first few encyclicals.) They are to be sold and or circulated to 40 million church leaders worldwide in all of the 9 major civilizations in all 43 Gateway languages, which is the ultimate scope of our current networks.

How can you use these encyclicals? Buckminster Fuller once said: “If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don’t bother trying to teach them. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking.” These encyclicals are now constructed as tools. First, use them as “major board discussions” in large-scale church-planting movements in the Global South, denominations, church associations and networks, mission agencies, parachurch organizations, NGOs, foundations, etc. Second, use them with the elder boards of your local churches. Third, use them for all believers in your churches. Let’s put an end to “uneducated laity” (Farley). And finally, use them with the nonliterate in your churches, they are smart people too (although oral editions are needed).

We did not change a thing in these encyclicals, outside of editorial corrections, thus our “situational” commitment. That is why a postscript is written to each one. Another postscript will appear in the 2020 editions. It is better to let them be what they are, which is the nature of global dialogue (see *The*

*Psychology of Philosophies* by Randall Collins). Debates go on often over a 40-year period as major paradigms shift. Eventually a new paradigm wins. The new paradigm must be founded solidly and squarely on “the way of Christ and His Apostles”! We are in such an era (see Hans Kuhn and David Bosch).



This is the second of a series of articles<sup>1</sup> written under the branding of a modern day encyclical, designed to circulate among church networks around the world.

Most of these articles will deal with encyclopedic issues, yet this one deals more with paradigmatic issues of building church networks, especially among the fast growing churches of what is now commonly referred to as the Global South. BILD has a unique stewardship of being able to partner with strategic church-planting movements all across the Global South. And part of that stewardship is addressing issues that have paradigmatic implications across these movements so that their movements might be solidly built upon the foundation of “the way of Christ and His Apostles.” To such an end, this paper is dedicated.

### **BIRTH PANGS OF A NEW APOSTOLIC AGE**

In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the expansion of the gospel and the birth of large-scale church-planting

---

<sup>1</sup> The first paper was titled “From Jesus to the Gospels” and focused on the use of the Epistles and the Gospels in the establishing process of the believer and of churches, addressing the issue of the misuse of the Gospels and the priority of Acts and the Epistles in the establishing process. It is available in article/booklet form, and part of a 6-part video series titled *From Jesus to the Gospels* from BILD International (bild.org).

movements in the Global South are growing at a pace previously unseen in church history. This expansion has given rise to several movements designed to capture this growth and to accelerate the multiplication of churches in these movements. All of them have roots in the Church Growth Movement spawned on the West Coast of the USA in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The 3 main movements are:

1. Cell movement
2. House church movement
3. Saturation movement

These are amazing movements. They all are attempts at moving from the reality of small, New Testament-type churches to networks that are complex enough to bring about sustainability to these churches and to accelerate the movements themselves as they spearhead the progress of the gospel with previously unheard of rates of growth. They are birth pangs of a new era. Each one attempts to give structure to the rapid multiplication of small New Testament like churches in order to both accelerate the growth and secure the fruit. It is the assertion of this paper that they are steps in the right direction, but each model is incomplete in the sense that several important New Testament principles have been left out of these models— principles that are embedded in the “way of Christ and His Apostles.” These principles are essential if these fast multiplying churches are to become strong and self-sustaining and if adequate numbers of leaders are to be trained to shepherd these churches.

A very important part of understanding this new age we are entering is to understand the role of Western Christendom in this shift. The West is in significant decline, and its institutions are a significant part of the reason for this failure. Western Christianity has become highly individualistic; the churches, full of traditions, are far removed from their first century roots; and the churches' missionary and theological education enterprises are in many ways in significant tension with the "way of Christ and His Apostles." This "way" is set forth in Acts and the Apostles' letters to the churches that make up much of the New Testament. This poses two problems. First, the West still has most of the money, especially the USA. And their response to the expansion of the gospel and to help the Global South develop its new emerging Christendom is to fund the founding of institutions similar to those in the West. Without the West's propagation of Western missions, denominations, and theological education institutions, the Global South would more naturally develop in apostolic traditions of the New Testament. Second, since the West is in decline, it too must rediscover its roots and get back to "the way of Christ and His Apostles." Yet it is hard to see our way back. It is hard to see through the paradigms of our traditions and institutionalization to see clearly what is actually there in Acts, the Epistles, and the Early Church, for that matter.

### **QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL CHURCH**

So it is very important for both the Global South church-planting movements and the churches in the declining West to rediscover their roots as found in the apostolic traditions in Acts and the Apostles' letters to the New Testament

churches. It is very important for us to look closely and carefully at this early church-planting movement to discover its success. We must understand why these churches were so strong and the secret of why they so successfully multiplied across the Roman Empire until they turned the entire world of that day upside down. The simplicity of the churches and the complexity of their movement are hard to see today because we are blinded by the clutter of our ways: our institutions, our traditions, and even our expectations of what it means “to go to church.” Thus the title of this encyclical: “The Churches of the First Century: From Simple Churches to Complex Networks.”

Over the last 30–35 years a search for the historical church was begun, partly because of the decline of the West and the shift of Christendom to the Global South and partly because of the shift from a modern to a postmodern culture. A school of scholars emerged, most of them non-evangelical, who have devoted their careers to studying the social-historical context of the early churches, attempting to discover exactly what they were really like.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Some of the main authors include Abraham Malherbe with his classic work *Paul and the Thessalonians*; David Verner’s *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastorals*; *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* by Bruce Winter; and one of the earliest classics: *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of Paul* by Wayne Meeks. Several collections have also emerged, such as *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (5 vols.), Bruce Winter, series editor; *Library of Early Christianity*, Meeks, Aune, Balch, Malherbe (8 vols.); and *First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World*, Winter, Blue, Clarke, Gill, etc. (6 vols.). In addition, several works have recently focused on the churches in cities, such as Paul Trebilco’s *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* and Peter Lampe’s groundbreaking research in *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*.

James Dunn has recently completed a mammoth work titled *Beginning from Jerusalem*, which is volume 2 of his *Christianity in the Making*. In it he refers to this whole movement as “the quest for the historical church.” In essence, it is a parallel movement to its predecessor, “the quest for the historical Jesus.” Speaking of his two volumes (the first is *Jesus Remembered*), he says:

“The quest (of the historical Jesus) has been the principal subject of volume 1, *Jesus Remembered*. But the quest for the historical church has been equally fascinating, and equally fraught with possibly challenging or even threatening outcomes. And it has absorbed scholarly research in equal measure, although it has made much less impact outside the ‘groves of Academe.’”<sup>3</sup>

Dunn’s most recent volume is the definitive work to date on the “quest for the historical church.” The research of this school of scholars has unearthed massive amounts of research on the early churches that had never before been known. It sheds enormous light on our search to uncover our roots in the early churches and in the “way of Christ and His Apostles.” In a very unique but unplanned way, this paper pairs with the first encyclical “From Jesus to the Gospel,” since much of it drew from research on the “quest for the historical Jesus” and brought about a much more informed perspective on the churches’ use of the Gospels in the context of the early churches. Now, this paper draws from research on the “quest of the historical church” and will

---

<sup>3</sup> *Remembering Jesus*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 2003) and *Beginning from Jerusalem*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, 2009) in *Christianity in the Making* by James Dunn.

hopefully bring about a much more informed perspective on the simple early churches and their ingenious networking.

So as we begin this encyclical, the two main questions are these:

1. Why did the Church expand so successfully in the first 300 years of the Early Church? Where did it go wrong when it took the hierarchical turn that led to over 1500 years of the Western church?
2. Today, as the gospel explodes across the Global South, can we decode the genius of the Early Church (or DNA of the New Testament churches) to build a similar network based on the “way of Christ and His Apostles” and to start new church-planting movements in the ruins of the post-Christian West?

## **GOING TO CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY**

This paper actually grows out of a small series of messages delivered to Oakwood Road Church on the need to deconstruct our own church meetings to align more closely with our own conclusions from a three- to four-year journey together, as church leadership, to refocus our ministry around what we call our Antioch Initiative. The Antioch Initiative was formed from a conclusion that in North America, we need to focus on church planting rather than church renewal. That led to planting three churches, which caused us to begin thinking through the issues of both networking churches and spontaneous expansion. Eventually, this led us to a conclusion that the heart of spontaneous expansion in the Early Church was the simple church

meeting, which better matched the social structure of churches as extended households and which easily multiplied. The series was entitled *Going to Church in the First Century* and the outline went as follows:

*Going to Church in the First Century*

The Spontaneous Expansion of the Early Churches

(7 weeks)

On the first day of the week.....

1. The Gathering of the Early Churches
2. The Meeting as the Lord's Supper
3. Preaching and Teaching
4. Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs
5. Meetings Throughout a City
6. The Heart of Spontaneous Expansion

Central to the series, and the inspiration for its name, was the book *Going to Church in the First Century* by Robert Banks.<sup>4</sup> It is a short but very powerful book, in story form, of what it was like to go to church on the first day of the week, in homes around a meal. This encyclical is a result of our extended study together as leaders and this series done in community.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Going to Church in the First Century* by Robert Banks. (Christian Books, 1980). On the research of this small book, Dunn writes, "R. J. Banks' *Going to Church in the First Century: An Eyewitness Account* provides an imaginative reconstruction well founded historically," in *Beginning from Jerusalem: The Making of Christianity*, vol. 2, by James Dunn.

**Main Thesis:** There is a connection between the spontaneous expansion of the Early Church and the simple gathering together of communities of believers on the first day of every week in homes/tenements around an evening meal, celebrating their new life in Christ.

What do I mean by spontaneous expansion? The churches expanded throughout the Roman Empire in a spontaneous fashion—not according to a carefully detailed plan of man, but rather within the strategic intent of apostolic leaders who responded to open doors, under the circumstantial and sometimes interventional direction of the Holy Spirit. As described in Acts and Paul's letters, the expansion contained the following elements:

1. The scattering of the Jerusalem church through persecution, with believers spontaneously sharing the gospel as they went.
2. The strategic intent of Paul as he evangelized strategic cities throughout the core of the Roman Empire, with the view of eventually going on to Spain.
3. Individuals and churches spontaneously permeating the surrounding areas, planting new churches.
4. Other apostolic leaders and key individuals contributing to the progress of the gospel in key cities and regions of the Empire.
5. Paul and eventually other apostolic leaders giving shape to all the churches through the circulation of the body of their letters and Gospels, grounding them in the Kerygma and Didache.

The concept was fully developed over 100 years ago by Roland Allen in his book carrying the very idea of its name: *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*.<sup>5</sup> Listen to Allen describe the concept:

“I mean the expansion that follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the church explaining to others the gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian church for men who see its ordered life and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches.”<sup>6</sup>

Now let's turn our attention to these small groups that gathered together weekly, called churches. By *small, simple gatherings*, I mean small, simple meetings of new believers that were called churches: simple, met in homes, on the first day of every week, around an evening meal, celebrating their new life, inviting friends, co-workers, relatives, etc. They were in essence kerygmatic communities. They all looked like this. And they multiplied around the world. The church began in Acts 2, where we see the church meeting together around four key elements: the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (cf. v. 42). Once the church was scattered and churches began multiplying around the Empire, that practice shifted to breaking bread on the first day of the week in small communities called churches (Acts 20:7–11). They were devoted to the Apostles' teaching,

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* by Roland Allen, Eerdmann, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (4 elements). The Lord added to their numbers. Then small simple gatherings of believers (churches), still practicing these four basic elements, multiplied around the world. For the next 300 years these small church communities, meeting in homes, multiplied around the world. Listen to the following research.

“The gathering of Christian believers in private homes (or homes renovated for the purpose of Christian gatherings) continued to be the norm until the early decades of the fourth century when under the tutelage of Constantine, the Christians began erecting the first basilicas. For almost 300 years the believers met in homes ....”<sup>7</sup>

“And no doubt the small house churches grew by inviting friends, visiting kinsfolk, fellow synagogue attenders, neighbors and colleagues to come to one of their regular meetings or shared meals.”<sup>8</sup>

“The rapid and wide expansion of the Church in the early centuries was due in the first place mainly to the spontaneous activity of individuals.... The Church expanded simply by organizing these little groups as they were converted, handing on to them the organization which she had received from her first founders.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> “Acts and the House Church” by Bradley Blue in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting—Volume 2: Greco-Roman Setting*, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, p. 641

<sup>9</sup> Allen, op. cit., p. 143.

The book of Acts clearly establishes a connection between these small, authentic gatherings of believers and their multiplication and spontaneous expansion, as the Lord added to their numbers in the first church in Jerusalem. Each of the six progress markers or summaries in Acts shows the Lord adding to the progress of the gospel through the multiplication of these churches.

**Corollary Thesis 1:** The meal was at the heart of these small, simple meetings that fed the spontaneous expansion of the Early Church—a concept that began in Acts 2:42 with fellowship and breaking bread from house to house. The concept of the meal was fully developed in Paul’s instruction about the “Lord’s Supper” to all the churches—an ingenious branding of churches worldwide.

This is a very important piece of the “branding” of these churches and stood at the core of their very identity all across the Empire for 300 years. It appears that gathering together on the first day of the week to break bread (Acts 20:7) was the practice of all the churches for the first 300 years. Let’s begin by looking at the role of the meal at these meetings.

We must first establish the centrality of the meal to the heart of these meetings and to the identity of these churches. There is a high probability that, besides all of them meeting in homes across the first 300 years, they all had a meal at every Sunday evening gathering. They broke bread at the beginning, formally

beginning *the meal* (the term often used to speak of the whole gathering),<sup>10</sup> and passed the cup at the end. Listen to Eberhard and Dunn as they address this reality.

“The celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which in the early times took place everyday, is now repeated every Sunday.”<sup>11</sup>

“And no doubt the small house churches grew by inviting friends, visiting kinsfolk, fellow synagogue attenders, neighbors and colleagues to come to one of their regular meetings or shared meals.”<sup>12</sup>

In *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, Peter Lampe identifies a practice of the early churches by mid 2nd century called “sending the Eucharist.” The idea is 3-fold:

1. Sent to other house churches in the city.
2. Sent to the poor in the city.

---

<sup>10</sup> “The word group is used in the NT of the breaking of bread or bread thus broken in pieces. There was an ancient custom in Palestine (Jer. 16:7; Lam. 4:4) of breaking bread with the hands rather than cutting it with a knife. At meals, whether ordinary family meals, special meals with guests or ritual feasts, e.g., the Passover or the beginning of the Sabbath, the head of the house gives thanks,<sup>5</sup> then breaks bread and hands the pieces to those who sit at table with him ( I, 477).<sup>6</sup> The breaking of bread is simply a customary and necessary part of the preparation for eating together. It initiates the sharing of the main course in every meal.” TDNT.

<sup>11</sup> The Early Christians: After the Death of the Apostles by Eberhard Arnold, p. 389.

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, p. 641.

3. Sent to other house church networks, such as Ephesus.

It was common with churches all through the Roman Empire to collect extra each week and send home with the poor in the churches or to the poor in the city. Again, this shows the centrality of the meal to all gatherings of these small churches throughout the first 300 years.

What did these meetings look like? Here we get an excellent picture from 1 Corinthians 11–14. It is quite possible to recreate the meeting: the Lord's Supper as a meal at the beginning of the meeting; followed by more formal elements such as dialogue around the Word together; with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs interspersed; and robust participation by members assembled. Here is a summary of the main ideas of 1 Corinthians 11–14.

1. They gathered together for the purpose of observing the *Lord's Supper*, the term being used to symbolize the whole meeting.
2. Before the meal they broke the bread as a symbol of Christ's body that was broken and the New Covenant, which now was operational with Christ's churches.
3. The meal, though in essence a benefactor meal for the poor, was not the main point but was central to the fellowship and family (household) atmosphere of the meeting.
4. The meal also served to build one mindedness in the group, experientially fostering relational harmony, thus making their hearts right toward each other and before God as they participated in dialogue around the prophetic Word.

5. Each person was to consider bringing a contribution to the meeting: teaching or exhortation from the Word, song, hymn, spiritual song, etc.
6. There was to be order to the time, and it was to be under the control of designated leaders.
7. The leaders used the time for communication of concerns to the church and to the network of churches or for communication from ministers of the gospel laboring for the progress of the gospel. (Acts 20:1–7)
8. The meeting was open to others beyond the local church.

We also know from early church literature that the picture in 1 Corinthians 11–14 became the common practice of the churches throughout the Empire.

Elements of the meetings:

In a family/household environment

Fellowship of a meal

Celebrative

Authentic, personal, relational

Interactive

Some structure/formality (breaking of bread, hosting)

Banks does a beautiful and quite accurate picture of what these meetings were like in *Going to Church in the First Century*. We also get a very thorough picture from “The Didache,” an Early Church document that gives an

extensive picture of this meeting, which was intended to be catechetical for the early churches, as seen in Niederwimmer’s research on the *Didache*.<sup>13</sup> The early churches gathered together on the evening of the first day of every week for a few hours around what was called the Lord’s Supper. It appears this practice carried on into the first three centuries of the Early Church.

The elements are as follows:

3–4 Hour Meeting/Meal

Catechetical beginning—songs, prayers

Breaking of bread

Meal begins

Informal elements

Formal elements

Passing of cup

Catechetical ending—song, prayers

What was the size of these meetings? The largest regular meetings (in the first 300 years of the Early Church) were probably 50–70. Wealthy benefactors with the capability of several hundred meeting in the dining halls or gardens of their wealthy homes were probably saved for occasional love feasts, but you cannot rule out larger, regular meetings in homes renovated for regular use. Research helps inform our understanding, as seen in Murphy-O’Connor<sup>14</sup> and Osick and

---

<sup>13</sup> Niederwimmer’s *The Didache in the Hermeneia Series* (Fortress)

<sup>14</sup> “House Churches and the Eucharist” by Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, chapter 9 in *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*, edited by Edward Adams and David Horrell (WJK,

Balch.<sup>15</sup> A typical house: maximum number was 50, or more probably 30–40. This was an upper middle class home. Wealthy homeowners had dining halls with attached gardens that are known to have patron meals that could serve large groups. Three examples given are for groups of 330, 360, and 1,135. We don't know how large the homes of people like Cornelius, Simon, Gaius, Crispus or Stephanus, Pricilla and Aquila, Philemon, Apphia and Archippus might have been. We will examine the issue of the size of the churches a little more thoroughly later in the article.

Why was the meal so important? It built the core identity of these meetings, a ritual imbedded in the gathering every time they met. In addition, it created an atmosphere that was a reminder to everyone that the essence of their social structure was a household, and it made for a natural ordering of the churches around that social structure. That would become immediately apparent to a visitor as well, with the welcoming and natural home environment of the household and the meal. At least six reasons can be identified for the genius of placing the meal in a home as a key, core element to these simple meetings of the churches:

1. The meal visualized the church as the family of God (household social structure).
2. It brought a natural fellowship element into the shape of the meeting.

---

2004).

<sup>15</sup> "Family Life, Meals and Hospitality," chapter 8 in *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, by Carolyn Osick and David Balch, in the Series *The Family, Religion and Culture*, edited by Don Browning and Ian Evison (WJK, 1997).

3. It put the Kerygma at the heart of the meeting (the good news of Jesus Christ).
4. It immediately formed the new community into a benefactor community—attractive good works.
5. It was simple and universal.
6. It promoted ingenious networking.

Why did it all change? Why was the full meal replaced with a ceremony including only the bread and the cup? First of all, we know that it all did change. The change primarily began around the removal of the meal from the gathering of believers. The tension to remove the meal began as early as the second century, but was finally banned in the churches by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Why? Because of an increasing tension. Barna and Viola paint the picture well as you can see from this extended quote:

“In the first and early second centuries, the early Christians called the Lord’s Supper the “love feast.” At that time they took the bread and cup in the context of a festive meal. But around the time of Tertullian the bread and the cup began to be separated from the meal. By the late second century, this separation was complete. ...By the fourth century, the love feast was prohibited among Christians! With the abandonment of the meal, the terms *breaking of bread* and *Lord’s Supper* disappeared. The common term for the now truncated ritual (just the bread and the cup) was the Eucharist.... The Supper was no longer a community event. It was rather a

priestly ritual that was to be watched at a distance. Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, there was an increasing sense of awe and dread associated with the table where the sacred Eucharist was celebrated.... Around the tenth century, the meaning of the word *body*, changed in Christian literature.... Consequently, the Lord's Supper became far removed from the idea of the church coming together to celebrate the breaking of bread.... All of these factors this gave rise to the doctrine of transubstantiation.... (This doctrine was worked out from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries.)

“While contemporary Protestant Christians have discarded the Catholic *notion* that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice, they have continued to embrace the *practice* of the Supper. Observe a Lord's Supper service (often called “Holy Communion”) in most Protestant churches and you will observe the following:

- The Lord's Supper is a bite-size cracker (or small piece of bread) and a shot glass of grape juice (or wine). As in the Catholic church, it is removed from the meal.
- The mood is somber and glum, just as it is in the Catholic church.
- Congregants are told by the pastor that they must examine themselves with regard to sin before they partake of the elements, a practice that came from John Calvin.
- Like the Catholic priest, many pastors will sport clerical robes for the occasion....

“With only a few minor tweaks, all of this is medieval Catholicism through and through.”<sup>16</sup>

**Corollary Thesis 2:** Teaching and preaching were also quite central to these small, simple meetings but took on an informal form with a strong dialogical component, which was more inviting to the inquiring mind and more effective as a catechetical tool than a more formal oratory form.

Over a decade ago, I remember comments from many individuals in our church who had just completed the first series of *The First Principles*. They said this was the first time they had really understood these issues. Two things became apparent to me. First, I had expositied almost all of these passages, and yet until they were involved in personal study and serious dialogue on these issues, they did not internalize the truths. And second, I needed to shift the type of messages to an issue based approach rather than pure exposition. It was important to become more issue based.

To me this meant more prophetic, to be more centered on issues, and much more serious about creating catechetical tools associated with the process. The plan became creating a discussion in the church that could be discussed in smaller groups and a focus on equipping more than just expositing the Word verse by verse. Yet I did not go nearly far enough, as you will see as we peer into the practices of preaching and teaching in these small churches

---

<sup>16</sup> *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* by Frank Viola and George Barna (Barna, 2002, 2008), pp. 193–196

of the first century. I am increasingly convinced that the sermon should not be central to our assembly meetings. It probably should not even exist as we know it, but the role of skilled teachers in and amongst a city of churches is vital. Again, Viola and Barna are insightful at this point.

“The sermon is the bedrock of the Protestant liturgy. For five hundred years it has functioned like clockwork. Every Sunday the pastor steps up to his pulpit and gives an inspirational sermon to a passive pew-warming audience.”<sup>17</sup>

They go on to convincingly show where the sermon came from historically and how it replaces the New Testament model of every believer participation and why at many points it is contrary to the biblical model. Yet they fail to deal with the skilled teacher element so important in Paul’s writings.

We need to begin our pursuit of understanding preaching and teaching in the church meetings of the early churches by a general survey of preaching and teaching. Several points become clear from just a sweep of several of the basic passages.<sup>18</sup> The following is a progression of the concept of preaching and teaching in the early churches of the New Testament. It will serve as a sort of brief biblical theology for the issue at hand.

---

<sup>17</sup> Viola and Barna, *op. cit.*, p. 85–86.

<sup>18</sup> The above point came from a study of the following passages: Acts 2:14-42 (Peter); Acts 3:11-26; Acts 4:5-13; Acts 5:27-32; Acts 10:1-48; 1 Corinthians 15:1-6; Acts 2:42; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 4:1-16; 6:1-17; 2 Timothy 2:1-14; 4:1-6; 1 Tim. 5:17ff; 2 Corinthians 2:1-5.

Primary examples of preaching and teaching:

Peter's sermons in Acts—Kerygma (Preaching)

Paul's Letters—Didache (Teaching)

Core theology from the basic New Testament passages from the Apostles' examples and letters to the churches:

1. *Preaching* generally refers to the proclamation of the gospel (Kerygma) and *teaching* refers to the faith (Didache).
2. Preaching was very important in the life of the first century churches.
3. Paul avoided the “polished rhetoric” style of the professional oratory of his day.
4. Paul devoted a tremendous amount of time to preaching and teaching.
5. Paul's teaching had a discussion or dialogue identity both in kerygmatic public situations (hall of Tyannus) and catechetical (didactic) situations in church assemblies.

Two passages are of particular importance to note before turning our attention directly to the shape of preaching and teaching in the meetings of the early churches: Acts 19:8-10 and Acts 20:7-12.

<sup>8</sup> He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued

daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.<sup>10</sup> This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.<sup>19</sup>

*Argued* comes from the Greek word dialogomenos (dialogued), used by Greeks for Socratic discussion, examination of the ultimate foundations (TDNT). It carries the sense of dealing with doubts so people get the idea, the fundamental principle (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle). *Lecture hall* comes from the Greek word schole (where scholar or scholastic comes from)—that in which leisure is employed; especially learned discussion, disputation, lectures (LSJ). Paul employed a style evidently designed to build open discussion around his presentations; dialogue is the main way it is described here. The second passage is even more insightful.

<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was **holding a discussion** with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight.<sup>8</sup> There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting.<sup>9</sup> A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead.<sup>10</sup> But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, “Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.”<sup>11</sup> Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he **continued to converse**

---

<sup>19</sup> Acts 19:8–10 NRSV.

with them until dawn; then he left.

<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.<sup>20</sup>

The word for “holding a discussion” (the word dialogue again) is the same as used in the hall of Tyrannus passage. The word for “continued to converse” is *homileo* (where we get homiletics). It refers to a close conversation and association (LSJ). The point is that Paul’s teaching had a discussion or dialogue identity both in kerygmatic public situations (hall of Tyrannus) and catechetical (Didactic) situations in church assemblies.

Now let’s try to peek into the assembly meetings to see preaching and teaching in action. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 we see that it should have an *every member* aspect to it, with each bringing something to contribute: a lesson, testimony, song, insight, etc. In Colossians 3:15-16 we get a picture of the Word richly dwelling through the interaction of the gathered community.

<sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.<sup>21</sup>

In Colossians 4:15-16 we see that the letter of Colossians was to be read in the

---

<sup>20</sup> Acts 20:7–20

<sup>21</sup> Colossians 3:15-16, NRSV

house churches of Colossae and Laodicea. (There was a network of churches that met in homes that made up the church at Colossae as well as Laodicea.) Every member participation, however, did not preclude the importance of the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching that Paul encouraged Timothy to devote himself to, taking great pains to establish the churches in the teaching (1 Timothy 4:7-16). And Timothy was encouraged to preach and teach “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:1-4). And Paul’s teaching was constant and even scholarly.

Now let’s try to put the picture together. There was an informal time, around the breaking of bread, with intentional and unintentional conversations by all. And there appeared to be a more formal time—opportunity for some to share, leaders to shape the conversation, and probably smaller teachings, possibly week-to-week continuity. Yet all teaching had a conversational element to it. And, we can conclude at least three elements, to build a core understanding of preaching and teaching in these early church meetings:

1. Teaching should have an every member aspect to it as the churches assemble, with each bringing something to contribute: a lesson, testimony, song, insight, etc.
2. The leadership needs to work hard at guarding the assembly meeting, understanding the faith, and some to work hard at preaching and teaching.
3. Skilled teachers, like Timothy, are essential in some form or another, to exercise their craft with great diligence in and amongst the assembly meetings.

We must take care, however, not to undermine the importance of skilled gifted apostolic leaders such as Paul and Timothy moving amongst the churches and teaching for extended periods of time in the church meetings themselves (cf. Acts 20:1-13). We see the following elements also emerge as part of the picture:

1. Skilled teachers probably moved amongst the networks of churches and dominated meetings at times. (Paul at Troas)
2. They also probably had some platform for teaching that all of the churches in the city-church could draw upon. (cf. Paul's example and the nature of Timothy's instructions: public reading, etc.)
3. They exercised some sort of authority in and amongst the elders of the churches. (elders and Timothy at Ephesus, 1 Tim. 5)

**Corollary Thesis 3:** Songs, hymns, and spiritual songs were the every-week forms of music that spontaneously grew out of the believers in those churches. They were significant vehicles for causing the Word to richly dwell in the lives of these small communities of faith, adding to the attraction of the watching world.

Finally, we will focus our attention on *music* in these small assembly meetings. Notice: I did not call it worship. Today we have created a radically different focus on music in our meetings, which at many points, again, is at odds with the simple meetings of the Early Church. We have created a whole industry that requires a high degree of professionalism and a whole new category of clergy: “ministers of music—clergy set to music.” Music coming out of the

lives of believers in simple home churches has been replaced with a music minister, formal choirs, and accompanying liturgy in the contemporary worship service. Again, Viola and Barna are extremely helpful. Their analysis is quite amazing and exactly along the same lines as I think. At times their critiques are not well researched and their solutions are too simplistic. But the critique is well reasoned and rooted in history.

“Walk into any Christian church service and you’ll find it will usually begin with the singing of hymns, choruses, or praise and worship songs. One person (or a team of people) will both lead and direct the singing. In more traditional churches, it will be the choir director or the music minister. (In some churches, this role is even played by the senior pastor.) Or it may be handled by the choir itself. In contemporary churches, it will be the worship leader or the praise and worship team.

“Leading up to the sermon, those who ‘lead worship’ select the songs that are to be sung. They begin those songs. They decide how those songs are to be sung. And they decide when those songs are over. Those sitting in the audience in no way, shape, or form lead the singing. They are led by someone else who is often part of the clerical staff—or who has similar stature.

“This is in stark contrast to the first-century way. In the early church, worship and singing were in the hands of all of God’s people. The

church herself led her own songs. Singing and leading songs was a corporate affair, not a professional event led by specialists.”<sup>22</sup>

They give us a brief history of the change from the participatory, one another ministry of “songs, hymns, and spiritual songs” of the early churches to the professionalization of worship in formal church services that we have today. Here is a summary of their research:

- A.D. 313: Choirs developed and trained to help celebrate the Eucharist.
- A.D. 367: Congregational singing banned—too much error.
- 5<sup>th</sup> century: School of Singing created by Pope Gregory—professionally trained for 9 years.
- Early Reformation: Congregational singing brought back into churches.
- 18<sup>th</sup> century: Congregational hymns became standard; choir helped lead congregational singing; no instruments.
- Eventually: Organ, robes, etc.
- Late 20<sup>th</sup> century: Worship team replaces choir, charismatic base, worship pastor emerges.

The early churches had a very different type of understanding of the role of music. It was part of a one another ministry causing the Word to richly dwell in their assembly gatherings as part of a one another ministry. It brought a high

---

<sup>22</sup> Viola and Barna, *op.cit.*, p. 158

degree of authenticity to their gatherings, reproducible in any assemblage, very attractive to visitors, and therefore ideally suited to the spontaneous expansion of the churches. Again, 1 Corinthians 14:26 and Colossians 3:15-16 along with the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:19-21 give us a fairly complete picture. We can include the following from these passages:

1. Songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (music) should rise right out of the believers in the churches.
2. Music is key to the Word richly dwelling in the churches and, therefore, is also key to building a spirit of oneness.
3. Songs, hymns, and spiritual songs are actually a form of theology, again key to making Scripture relevant in culture.
4. Speaking to one another in this way in community is very directly related to the progress of the gospel.

A careful study of the phrase “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” used both in Colossians and Ephesians, demonstrates that it is sort of a taxonomy for the role of music in the Early Church assemblies. *Psalms*—putting the Psalter to work for the church. These would be songs applying to all the forms of the Psalms (laments, praise psalms, wisdom, etc.).<sup>23</sup> *Hymns*—an expression of the life of the community as the Spirit gives expression through communities of faith in response to the Word being preached and taught. The hymns would become part of the church’s ever growing body of songs, including new songs

---

<sup>23</sup> *Psalms*—song of praise, psalm (BGAD) twitching, twanging of fingers, mostly of musical instruments, song sung to the harp (LSJ) song of praise (EDNT).

that become “classics” in each generation of the Church.<sup>24</sup> *Spiritual songs*—contemporary expressions of songs born out of the life of communities of faith, sung by those communities and rooted in the styles and culture of the day. One would expect a majority of them to be meaningful but not “classics.” The classics are destined to become the deposit of that generation and to become part of the hymnology of that generation.<sup>25</sup>

We can conclude several things from the role of music in the Early Church assemblies. Let’s add these new elements of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs back into our argument so far:

1. Churches in any generation need to be instructed in this paradigm.
2. The Church has never developed a complete body of work that follows the 5-book structure of Psalms, carefully cataloguing and expressing the types of psalms that are intended to give expression to the whole faith experience of the people of God and the normative faith life and development of the believer.
3. Our meeting times need to give opportunity for a constant response of the believing community in new song. Every believer so led should be given opportunity for expression in the meetings of the church.

---

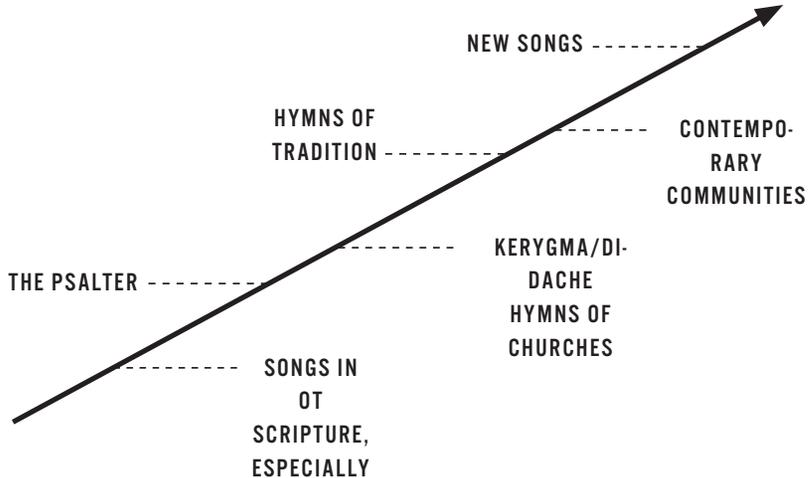
<sup>24</sup> *Hymns*—hymn or song of praise (BGAD). In the N.T. it seems to have a focus on Christ—sort of a kerygma or didache focus (cf. Philippians 2:6–11). See many passages in “Worship in the Early Church,” chapter 5 in *The Emergence of the Church* by Arthur Patzia, pp. 199–202.

<sup>25</sup> *Spiritual songs*—sacred song, a song of praise to God (BGAD), new song; to sing with new words, to utter a new song, melodious (LN) celebration is in view; new is in view in Vine’s as well.

4. The catechism of our communities of faith needs to include the Psalter and hymns from each generation of the Church, including relevant liturgy from each paradigm deposit (Kung), to enable new songs to be built out of an awareness of past faith expressions.
5. We need to identify young “artists” from each generation—ideally, in each “diocese” of churches—to encourage, free up, and maybe even support them to carry out their work.
6. We have to deconstruct our “Sunday morning liturgical event” and its “written beforehand, delivered to a congregation” preaching paradigm (Farley), to return to the Early Church “meal-based” community event in order to unleash psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of growth and worship.
7. Let’s not forget that the body of hymnody includes Eastern church/ Catholic church liturgy; classical literature of the Enlightenment church (Handel’s *Messiah*); the Reformation hymnology; and I am sure, with research, a lot more!

Again, why is all of this so important? There is a connection between the spontaneous expansion of the Early Church and the simple gathering together of communities of believers on the first day of every week in homes or tenements around an evening meal, with the Word richly dwelling in their midst and pouring back out of their lives in song, celebrating their new life in Christ.

## PSALMS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS



## COMPLEX NETWORK OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Now it is time to turn our attention to the complex network of the Early Church and address the questions we asked at the end of the introduction: Why did the church expand so successfully in the first 300 years of the Early Church? Where did it go wrong when it took the hierarchical turn that led to over 1500 years of the Western church? And can we decode the genius of the Early Church (or DNA of the New Testament churches) to build a similar network based on the “way of Christ and His Apostles? to start new church-planting movements in the ruins of the post-Christian West?

A conversation I had with a member of our church late this summer, just before beginning this series, has had a significant effect on the last section of this paper. It was one of those brief introductions that, the moment I heard it, struck me with its potential significance. This individual leads a research team at Iowa State University that has won national recognition for its computer programming work on creating virtual reality coal efficient plants to aid the future development of clean coal. One of the books that influenced him and his team was a book called *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*.<sup>26</sup> We had just finished lunch together in which I had explained to him our provisional plan to deconstruct ORC in light of the church-planting goals and networking issues of the Early Church’s success. It was sort of a “by the way” at the

---

<sup>26</sup> *Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science and Everyday Life*, by Albert-László Barabási (Plume, 2002)

end of our conversation, but he mentioned *Linked* and said it was one of the most important books on the new science of networking. He said the author mentions that the master example of networking from the past is the Apostle Paul. And it is a secular book! I immediately bought the book (and over 20 others) on the science of complex networking to quickly get on top of the key conversations in this fast developing discipline.

I discovered several things. While the science of networking and complex systems has been around for a couple hundred years, since about 1995, it has developed at an exponential rate. There were huge breakthroughs in 1995 and in 2002. The book *Linked* has been a tremendous help to me in providing fresh insight into the genius of Paul's networking skills. By the way, here is what Barabási actually says about Paul:

“Paul was a master of first-century social and religious links, the only network at the beginning of the modern era that could carry and spread a faith.”<sup>27</sup>

He goes on to say, that when you finish this book “You will come to understand how and why Paul succeeded, and how, despite some obvious differences, his social milieu was similar to the one we experience today.”<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 7

Several concepts are important from *Linked*, but here is a brief summary of the ones I will be using in the remainder of this article. These are network components or “links.”

**Nodes, Small Worlds.** These are the smallest points of the network. They represent the end of the links, which when they are linked to each other form a network. They are a small world in-and-of themselves.

**Clusters, Modules.** Nodes cluster together, which can also be referred to as modules if they have similar characteristics. It is like some nodes naturally huddle together.

**Hubs and Connectors.** Hubs refer to a few very highly connected nodes. Connectors are nodes with an anomalously large number of links and are present in very diverse, complex systems.

**Hierarchies and Communities.** Collections of node clusters and modules that in essence multiply, creating a natural, web-like hierarchy. Hierarchical modularity permits parts to evolve separately. “If mutation is an improvement, the organism with the superior module will flourish”.<sup>29</sup>

**Scale-Free Networks, Complex Network.** Scale-free networks are networks with “many complex webs, surrounding us, which are far

---

<sup>29</sup> Barabási, p. 236.

from random, but are characterized by the same robust and universal architecture.”<sup>30</sup> The conclusion is that complex networks can now be mapped, due to a growing understanding of the components of complex networking; however, much is yet unknown about the theory of complex systems.

Essentially, we began by looking at what are called nodes in this new emerging science of networks. Or maybe easier to grab is the link called “small worlds.” This brings us full circle back to our thesis: there is a connection (“Link”) between the spontaneous expansion of the Early Church and the simple gathering together of communities of believers on the first day of every week in homes or tenements around an evening meal, celebrating their new life in Christ.

### **CITY-BASED CHURCHES, CLUSTERS, AND HUBS**

In beginning to understand the incredible network of the early churches, we must understand that house churches clustered in and around strategic cities. Remember the “Pauline Cycle”? It starts with “evangelizing strategic cities.” Acts gives us the architecture of the network, and the Epistles give us much more “qualitative details.” Three cities emerge as the most important in the narrative of the missionary journeys: Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome. Rome was clearly the final focus of Paul’s strategy. Let’s look at each city and see what we can learn about these networks clusters.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

**Antioch.** Antioch was the first major hub for the emerging network of the early churches; it was the hub for the first missionary journeys. At this time we do not know as much about the churches of Antioch, as we do about those of Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica, which now have major works recently written of the early churches of those cities. However, we do know Antioch was a hub from its strategic placement in the book of Acts, which visualizes the heart of all mission work, envisioned in the Pauline cycle of Acts 13:1–14:28: Paul and Barnabas set out on their missionary journeys evangelizing strategic cities, establishing the churches, and entrusting those churches to leaders they continued to train and develop, only to continue the cycle on several future missionary journeys. Antioch was a hub that Paul returned to again and again. It was also a hub in the sense that it became, both in name and location, the center for the Antiochene tradition of the first 300 years. The Antiochene tradition stewarded the tradition of the “way of Christ and His Apostles,” set forth by the Apostles as recorded in Acts, the Epistles, followed by the Gospels. We will touch on this tradition at the end of the article.

**Ephesus.** Ephesus also became a significant hub in the emerging networks of the early churches. Paul spent two years based out of the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, using it as a base for proclaiming the Word. As a result, several churches began in cities around Ephesus.<sup>31</sup> Extensive research has begun to

---

<sup>31</sup> *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership, and Worship*, by Arthur Patzia (IVP, 2001), pp. 122–131.

break ground regarding the high probability that there were multiple house churches in Ephesus under some sort of citywide organization.<sup>32</sup> Ephesus continued to be a strategic city through the years. It was the “3rd capital of Christianity” (about 250,000 population at the time of Paul) and the most influential church in the world by the end of the first century.<sup>33</sup> It was a strategic hub and connector in and amongst the network of early churches.

We know it is strategic for several reasons from the texts:

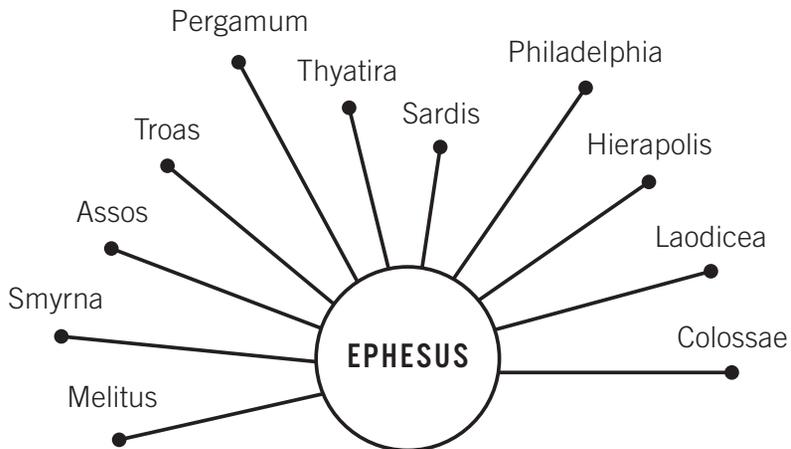
1. Paul spent three years there.
2. There was a convergence of key leaders there: Apollos, Aquila, and Pricilla.
3. Paul invested very heavily in the eldership at the foundation, more than at any other church.
4. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul fully revealed his stewardship of the Church being Christ’s plan for the age.
5. Paul stationed Timothy there to solve problems with the eldership; these problems emerged a dozen years after Paul trained them.
6. John also heavily invested in the Ephesian churches, as seen by his letters and Revelation 2:1-7.

---

<sup>32</sup> Tribilco, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2, 11–18.

## EPHESUS AS A HUB/CONNECTOR



**Rome.** In one sense, Rome was the largest “hub or connector” in the Roman Empire. It was the ultimate focus of all of Paul’s strategy. It was also clearly a city-based network cluster, using modern network research terminology. Paul addressed the churches in Rome as one church.

He established his authoritative role as an Apostle with a special stewardship. He considered them to be not “fully established” and susceptible to getting off track without him personally establishing them in his gospel and his teaching, which he considered to be vital for the long-term stability of the churches in Rome. He addressed the believers as one, clearly appealing to his stewardship as being foundational to their unity.

We learn an enormous amount about the churches of Rome from the last chapter of the book of Romans. We see that Paul’s purpose in addressing them was to establish them “in his gospel and the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Romans 16:25-27), which he was trying to do with most of his letters. In Romans 16 (especially when compared with a similar chapter 1 Cor. 16), we learn a lot about the churches in Rome through Paul’s references to many different leaders and churches in the homes of those leaders. Conventional research has traditionally seen three house churches,<sup>34</sup> but Lampe’s amazing research in his book *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, presents a convincing case that there were seven islands of Christianity, maybe eight, by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in

---

<sup>34</sup> Trebilco, op. cit., p. 95.

late November, 56 A.D. Even at a simple glance, Paul greets the church in Aquila and Priscilla's house, and it appears that each of the other names clustered in the greeting is a small network of Christians in Rome. After reviewing those clusters, Lampe concludes:

“Thus, in the capital city of Rome, we count five different Christian islands. If we assume that the other fourteen people of Romans 16 do not belong to any of these five crystallization points and that they hardly could all have belonged to only one other additional circle, then this results in at least seven separate islands of Christianity. “At least an eighth may be added to this when Paul sojourned in Rome and gathered Christians in his rented accommodation (see above, on Acts 28:30f.). There is nowhere any indication of a central location for the different groups scattered over the city. Each circle of Christians may have conducted worship services by itself in a house or apartment, so that it can be referred to as a house community.”<sup>35</sup>

Lampe goes on to describe Christianity in the late first and second centuries.

“The Roman *tituli* of late antiquity are relatively independent parishes within the city (“quasi diocesis”), with their own place of assembly, their own clergy, cult, baptistery, and burial place. We know the number and the names of the *tituli* from the signature lists of the

---

<sup>35</sup> From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries, by Peter Lampe (Fortress, 2003), pp. 359–60.

Roman synods. Some 25 titular parishes can be gleaned from the lists.”<sup>36</sup>

“In the middle of the third century, Cornelius records 46 presbyters in Rome. If we calculate that in the third century 2–3 presbyters worked at one titulus (this relationship is at least attested by the signature lists of the Roman synods of late antiquity), we arrive at 15–23 titular parishes in the middle of the third century.”<sup>37</sup>

Let me summarize for you some of Lampe’s key research as we attempt to draw conclusions about this key city as it pertains to it being a network cluster in the complex network of both the New Testament Church and the Early Church.

Background facts:<sup>38</sup>

1. By 250 A.D. there were 46 presbyters in Rome.
2. There were 15–23 titular parishes at that time, with 2–3 presbyters in each church meeting in houses, villas, or rented quarters of wealthy, patron like owners.
3. Until near the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, property had to be owned by individuals, as no provision was made by law for corporate ownership of property.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 393ff.

4. These churches had a sense that they were part of the church at Rome, but they never met together and were very theologically diverse.
5. They accepted this wide range of theological diversity and seldom seemed concerned about that diversity.
6. The center of their collective identity revolved around “sending the Eucharist,” a concept of “sending pieces of the Eucharistic elements to each other through messengers.”
7. The church (made up of 15–23 titular churches, named after their patron) was loosely led by a group of “presbyters and teachers” that met in occasional conventions which focused on representing the Roman church to churches in other cities, and it eventually began to be appealed to concerning doctrinal matters.
8. Any groups regarded as heretical were still able to remain in Eucharistic fellowship with the other house communities of the city.
9. This collegial type of presbyterial governorship still prevailed up through the mid-half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
10. An official “list of bishops” eventually emerged in a more formal role by around 180 A.D.
11. In the Apostolic tradition, as the monarchical bishop emerged, he did not reside in a particular place, but abode in different communities at different times.

According to Lampe's research, there were four kinds of house church communities in the Early Church in Rome.

1. Oikos model—the private invitation of the host to fellow Christians in his district of the city.
2. A philosophical school—house circle centered on a person as a teacher.
3. A mystery cult—held together by secret tradition, sacramental rites, hymns, cultic pictures.
4. Community that was understandable for pagans—slaves or freed persons of masters.

As to the size of these churches, it has been previously concluded that the mature house churches commonly hovered around two common sizes: 25–40 and 50–70, including children. For a Jewish worship community, 10 adult men were sufficient.<sup>39</sup> If they brought along their wives, there would be 20 adults. This would mean 25–40 including children. And remember, Matthew 18 indicates that God is laying foundations for a church where 2–3 are gathered. It is also clear that mature house church communities were in the 50–70 people range. And it is clear the city-based network of churches networked in a city or surrounding villages. It is possible to present sort of a taxonomy or, in terms of contemporary complex network research, city-based network clusters.

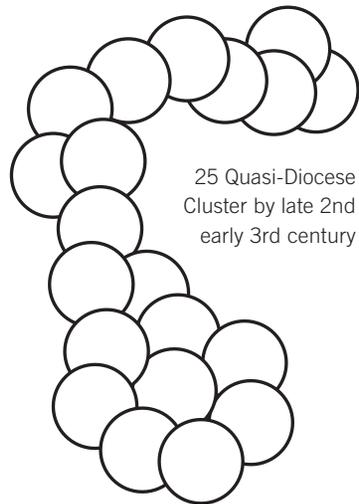
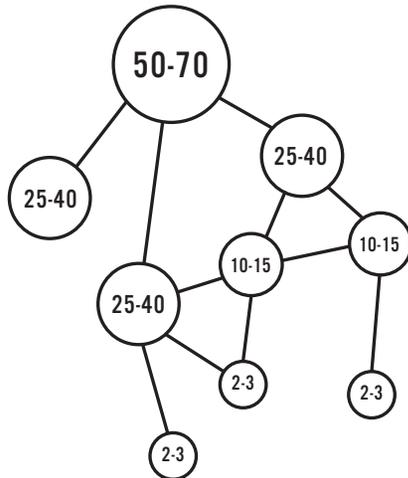
---

<sup>39</sup> Lampe, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

## ROME'S CITY-BASED NETWORK MODULE

### QUASI-DIOCESE CLUSTERS

Single network cluster during time of Paul's Writing, Romans 16



## COMPLEX NETWORK OF THE EARLY CHURCHES

The architecture of the complex network of the early churches becomes increasingly clear at this point in our argument: nodes (churches) to clusters (small city-based church networks) to hubs/connectors (strategic cities) to complex networks (apostolic leaders—sodality/modality,<sup>40</sup> Jerusalem councils, publishing house, Paul’s communication network, etc.). Let’s look at each piece briefly.

**The small world of the churches.** The small simple churches of the first 300 years of the Early Church are the nodes. These small worlds were carefully nurtured and shaped. One set of traditions was delivered to each of them. They all shared the DNA of the Kerygma and the Didache. They had one social structure put in place. They formed the core identity of the believer. All the meetings across the Empire had a similar shape—a branding if you will—meeting in homes, around a meal. And they were networked together, city by city, all over the Empire. They sat at the heart of the spontaneous expansion.

**From churches to church clusters.** Small city-based church network clusters emerged. Even the less strategic cities appeared to have

---

<sup>40</sup> The concept of sodality/modality is developed in the paradigm paper, “Church-Based Leadership: Creating a New Paradigm” by Jeff Reed, which is included in the Leadership Series I course titled *Leaders and the Early Church*, and will be treated fully in *The Antioch Manifesto*.

a cluster of small house communities in them, as seen in Colossae (Colossians 4:15) and the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). These city-based network clusters were networked together in a city and surrounding villages. As the churches multiplied, they also began networking together with each other and with strategic city-based network clusters. Rome became a picture of one of the most extensive of these city-based church network structures. These city-based churches appeared to spontaneously multiply, to evolve separately from each other. They seemed to be formed in a self-organizing way.

**From church clusters to strategic church hubs.** Strategic cities became network hubs. The churches in that city obviously were filled with well-connected people (Roman 16, 1 Corinthians 16). The churches of Rome, Ephesus, and Antioch were the hubs of the first century network. And Antioch, Alexandria and Carthage became the strategic hubs of the Early Church, with Ephesus and Rome playing a key role. The connectors were the apostolic leaders and other strategic leaders clustered around these hubs. These were the key cities among the 31 major cities of the Roman Empire, cities ranging from 30,000 to 450,000, near the end of the first century.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became and Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, by Rodney Stark (Harper, 2006). See chapter two, “The Urban Empire.”

**From strategic church hubs to complex apostolic networks.** The complex network was shaped and established, if you will, mainly by the Apostle Paul and his team. They took this scale-free network, with a natural hierarchy of multiplying city-based network clusters (modules in the sense that though each was unique, they all had common identity, shape, and traditions: the teaching, the faith, the deposit, the sound doctrine, and core community social structure and meeting patterns).

How did Paul do it?

- He gave them a sense of becoming a large network. From the collection of monies for a major relief effort to a very personal greeting across the entire network, they knew they were becoming a movement.
- He built a communication network: messengers, visits, greetings, letters of recommendations, reports.
- He built common practices in these communities. In 1 Corinthians, he intended these practices to apply to “all the churches.”

Essentially the system he built held the network together in the correct way for 300 years. Amazing! Now it is important to map this complex network that emerged toward the end of the apostolic age. Listen to what Barabási tells us about the next steps to the process.

“Despite its elegance, simplifying all webs into graphs poses some formidable challenges.”<sup>42</sup>

“The construction and structure of graphs or networks is the key to understanding the complex world around us.”<sup>43</sup>

Let’s now attempt to map the complex network of the early churches.

I see at least three tasks for apostolic type leaders to accomplish as the essence of their stewardship in leading church-planting movements.

1. Establish the churches correctly: solid DNA of the “way of Christ and His Apostles.”
2. Invest in strategic hubs, shaping the churches, building them into strong networks of churches, committed to serving the whole; and build a series of Pauline teams based among the strategic hubs, moving amongst the church clusters and across the network, respecting the sodality/modality balance of leadership.
3. Design a complex network, including current and future apostolic leadership; shepherd the movement with network wide communication; recognize leadership; write key papers, books, and letters to the network; and convene “Jerusalem councils” as needed.

---

<sup>42</sup> Barabási, op. cit. p. 16

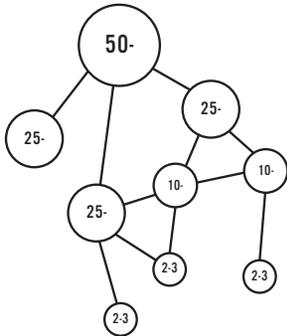
<sup>43</sup> Barabási, op. cit., p. 12

## COMPLEX NETWORK OF THE EARLY CHURCHES

### COMPLEX NETWORK MAPPING AROUND 100 AD

#### CITY-BASED CHURCH

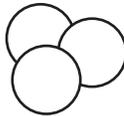
Web of House Church Communities  
(a Quasi-Dioecese)



Carefully established churches, trained leaders in "way of Christ and His Apostles (by letters, visits, sending co-workers).

#### CITY-BASED CHURCHES

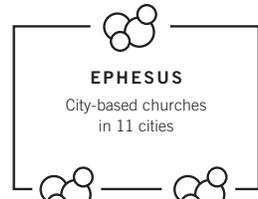
Network/Cluster of City-Based Churches



**31 MAJOR CITIES EXISTED**  
100 AD

Strategically planted churches with the view of their spontaneous expansion reaching the entire Roman Empire.

#### CITY-BASED CHURCHES AS STRATEGIC HUBS



#### ROME

7 or 8 quasi diocese in Rome; grew to 15-23 by late 2nd century

#### ANTIOCH

Base for 3 missionary journeys; Antioch Tradition

### COMPLEX APOSTOLIC NETWORK

Apostolic Leadership Teams  
sodality/modality

Spent significant time and efforts, sometimes many years, establishing strategic hubs for the movement.

I believe this gives us a very clear explanation of BILD: It is a tool to build a complex apostolic network designed to serve movements of churches.

1. The First Principles system to establish your churches—the nodes.
2. The BILD learning system Type I–V, the Leadership Series I and II, and the Certification System to build your apostolic teams.
3. Paradigm papers, encyclicals, and the Antioch Manifesto—dialogue to construct your apostolic network and strategy.

Should we follow the general patterns here in building our church-planting movements? I have answered this in many other papers and training materials, but let's look at the reasons just from this paper. If we do not take time to establish our churches solidly, seeing that the right DNA is embedded in each of the churches, we cannot expect the network to grow strong, let alone even be sustainable. If we do not develop leaders, we cannot expect the churches to be able to weather the problems Satan throws at them. If we do not build resource center hubs, in an efficient and strategic manner, we cannot expect to be able to service the churches. Yet the main reason in this paper relates to the issue we began with, accelerating and preserving the spontaneous expansion. It is very clear that the model itself is key to the incredible progress of the gospel and the spontaneous multiplication of churches over the first 300 years of the Early Church. The churches were simple, yet designed to mature believers and be attractive to nonbelievers, creating an easy model for multiplication. The network structure is pliable, allowing for various parts of the system to evolve on their own, yet having enough leadership and

authority to shape the network and movement as it expands. The network is self organizing, yet shaped by the gifted leaders using the Word to stabilize the parts, correct the mutations, and give the entire network shape. What we see in Acts and the letters of the Apostles to the churches is a perfectly balanced, fine-tuned complex network that amazes scientists just discovering the reality of complex networks and trying to formulate the theory of complexity—that is, attempting to frame in the map of life. Why would we turn to any other way than the “way of Christ and His apostles”? We need again to heed Roland Allen’s prophetic exhortation.

“People have adopted fragments of St. Paul’s method and have tried to incorporate them into alien systems, and the failure which resulted has been used as an argument against the Apostle’s method.... When these false and partial attempts at imitating the Apostle’s method have failed, men have declared that the apostolic method was at fault and was quite unsuited to the condition and circumstances of present-day missions. The truth is that they have neither understood nor practiced the Apostle’s method at all.

“St. Paul’s method is not in harmony with the modern Western spirit.... We cannot imagine any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate machinery which we have invented.”<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s Or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: World Dominion Press; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1962) pp. 5–6)

The many implications in all of this for guiding us in establishing vibrant, multiplying church-planting movements is quite extensive. Let me give two modern day examples to help you see the model in action. Al Qaeda is an excellent example of the type of complex network we are describing, like the one established by Paul. Listen to this network described again by Barabási.

“Today the world’s most dangerous aggressors, ranging from al Qaeda to the Colombian drug cartels, are not military organizations with divisions but self-organized networks of terror. In the absence of familiar signs of organization and order, we often call them “irregular armies.” Yet by doing so we again equate complexity with randomness. In reality, terrorist networks obey rigid laws that determine their topology, structure, and therefore their ability to function. They exploit all the natural advantages of self-organized networks, including flexibility and tolerance to internal failures. Unfamiliarity with this new order and a lack of language for formalizing our experience are perhaps our most deadly enemies.

“To be sure, the battle against al Qaeda can and will be won by crippling the network, either by removing enough of its hubs to reach the critical point for fragmentation or by draining its resources, preparing the groundwork for cascading internal failures. Yet, collapsing al Qaeda will not end the war. Other networks with similar scope and ideology will no doubt take its place. Bin Laden and his lieutenants did not invent terrorist networks. They only rode the rage

of Islamic militants, exploiting the laws of self-organization along their journey. If we ever want to win the war, our only hope is to tackle the underlying social, economic, and political roots that fuel the network's growth. We must help eliminate the need and desire of the nodes to form links to terrorist organizations by offering them a chance to belong to more constructive and meaningful webs. No matter how good we become at winning each net battle, if we are unable to inhibit the desire for links, the prerequisite for the formation of these deadly self-organized webs, the net war will never end."<sup>45</sup>

A second illustration is the Global Cities Project. I first came across it five years ago in *Brown's Journal of World Affairs*.<sup>46</sup> It lays out a global network of cities that creates three tiers of cities on a matrix that clearly lays out a strategic networking grid for a global church-planting strategy. This is how we have shaped many of our strategic priorities for BILD worldwide, including our 30-city urban strategy for North American church planting through the

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Barabási, pp. 225, 226.

<sup>46</sup> *Brown's Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 11, issue 2, Winter/Spring 2005, devotes four articles to the global cities theme. Another outstanding piece is "U.S. Cities in the 'World City Network,'" in February 2005 of *The Brookings Institute's Metro Policy Program*. "The best author is Saskia Sasson, who has written four key books on global cities: *The Global City: Global Networks, Linked Cities; Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*; and *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm*. You can also find the full global city movement history and a list of all of the global cities by tier on the Wikipedia.com website under global cities.

Antioch Initiative and the Antioch School of Church Planting and Leadership Development. I was soon to discover that all the complex network research breakthroughs in the last 15 years gave birth to the entire Global Cities Project.

A final implication explains why BILD can get into almost any church-planting movement worldwide—denominational or otherwise. It is because we follow this type of complex networking that is self-organizing and facilitates spontaneous expansion. Because of following this model, we do not need to replace another’s hierarchical structure with our own. We can just carry out our apostolic team mandate with the belief that we can influence networks by our leadership, resources, and handling of the Word, having confidence that the “way of Christ and His apostles” is vastly superior and will shape complex networks built on shaky foundations for the better—whether it be High Church or decentralized, structureless house church movements.

If this model of complex networks is so amazing, why did the post-Constantine Church abandon it? Where did the Early Church go wrong? Justo Gonzalez, in his monumental works on historical theology, deals with this issue by explaining the three traditions of the Early Church.<sup>47</sup> The three traditions include the Carthaginian, the Alexandrian, and the Antiochene.

The Carthaginian Tradition grew out of the need to establish Christianity as

---

<sup>47</sup> Gonzalez has a very impressive body of work, including a 2-volume church history, *The Story of Christianity* and a 3-volume historical theology, *A History of Christian Thought*. The specific argument at hand on the three traditions of the *Early Church* is from *Christian Thought Revisited*.

a base for Roman law, as the ideal of law became the unifying worldview of the Roman Empire, especially as Christianity emerged as the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. The Alexandrian Tradition grew out of a desire to defend Christianity to the Greek mind by addressing the Greek philosophical worldview, answering the fundamental questions of Hellenistic (Western) philosophy, and demonstrating the superiority of Christianity. The Antiochene Tradition grew out of a desire to preserve the apostolic teaching (Kerygma and Didache) by those trained by the Apostles, as they attempted to shepherd their churches, preserving their teaching for future generations of churches and recognizing future leaders committed to this “way of Christ and His Apostles.” By falling into the trap of trying to make the churches more palatable to both the Roman and the Greek audience, the churches sold their birthright, if you will, turning in the “way of Christ and His Apostles” for a “better” way—which led us on a journey through Greek Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism, through fundamental Protestantism to modern day liberalism—a journey eventually leading to the death of Western Christendom. But today is another day, a day much like the first 300 years of the early churches, a day in which we must return again to the “way of Christ and His Apostles.”

## THE THREE TRADITIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

### CARTHAGINIAN TRADITION

Way of Roman law

Carthage	Theologians:
“Roman law”	Clement of Rome;
Second roots	Hermas, Clement
	Tertullian

### ANTIOCHENE TRADITION

“Way of Christ and His Apostles”

Northeastern	Theologians:
Mediterranean (Asia	Much of NT,
Minor and Syria)	Ignatius, Polycarp,
tradition roots	Theophilus
	Irenaeus
Petrine/Markan, Matthaen,	
Johannine Communities	

Roman Empire, Roman  
Catholic Church

### ALEXANDRIAN TRADITION

Way of Greek philosophy

Alexandria	Theologians: Philo
Greek	(Justin), Clement of
philosophical	Alexandria Origen
roots	

Western  
Theological  
Tradition  
(Protestantism)

This whole paper is far from just a theoretical exercise. It is the basis for our own future as a local church—ORC and our initial church plants in Ames and Des Moines.<sup>48</sup> It is also the basis for our partnerships with church-planting movements in the West in what we call the Antioch Initiative, through which we hope to see 20,000 plus churches planted over the next couple of decades. And finally, it is intended for our Global South partners, who truly find themselves in the center of a new apostolic age not seen since the first 300 years of the Early Church. I have had the privilege of working and now partnering with most of the major church-planting movements in India over the last five years. Without that incredible experience and the pioneering efforts of literally hundreds of Indian leaders, many of these ideas would not be truly tested. I remember early on, probably early 2005, I was on a flight from India to Bangkok with Alex Abraham of Operation Agape. Through the night, I was trying to explain to him the importance of Antioch centers in a church-planting movement. Alex, I hope this paper takes our discussion much further down the road as we all partner together in the West and in the Global South, in the task of being faithful and fruitful in our stewardships from God during this incredible time in the history of the Church.

---

<sup>48</sup> The provisional plan for our own network and map for our Antioch Initiative is titled “The City-Based Church Network—Ames, Des Moines: A Network of Kerygmatic Communities (Emerging House and Community Churches) Serving the Ames, Des Moines Metroplex.”

## Discussion Questions

The following questions are designed to be discussed after reading the entire encyclical. They can be used for a retreat, a small group gathering, or by church leaders at leadership meetings. A small group Bible study, a fellowship group, a cell church, or house church could easily spend four weeks, an issue each week, discussing an encyclical. It is recommended that the entire encyclical be read again before discussing each issue.

### **ISSUE 1: LARGE-SCALE CHURCH-PLANTING MOVEMENTS**

#### **Questions:**

1. Why did the small band of churches in the first century successfully multiply across the Roman Empire until they turned the world upside down?
2. What is the connection between the small, authentic communities (churches) and the worldwide progress of the gospel?
3. How can the genius of the apostolic network, built by the first century apostolic leaders, especially Paul, shape our church movements and networks today? Should it shape our church movements today?
4. What are our church-planting movements today—cell, house church and saturation church-planting movements (now called CPMs)—and denominations missing from the “way of Christ and His Apostles”? Why do they fail to spontaneously expand generation after generation like 1st century churches did?

**ISSUE 2: GOING TO CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY****Questions:**

1. What was it like going to church in the first century?
2. Why was the DNA similar in all of the churches? Was it that way by the Apostles' design?
3. What were the essential elements of the small, authentic church communities?
4. Which of these elements do you think Paul intended to be practiced by every generation of churches? Which ones are we not practicing today in our churches?

**ISSUE 3: THE CONCEPT OF SPONTANEOUS EXPANSION****Questions:**

1. What exactly is spontaneous expansion? How does this contrast with the Western or denominational way of planting churches?
2. What are the keys to sustaining the spontaneous expansion of churches?
3. Is it possible for our existing denominations and church associations to recover the spontaneous expansion of our churches?
4. Why is it critical that the large church-planting movements emerging all across the Global South, in the last half of the 20th century and first decades of the 21st century, grasp the concept of spontaneous expansion?

## ISSUE 4: COMPLEX APOSTOLIC NETWORKS

### Questions:

1. What exactly is the new emerging science of “complex networks”? What are the core elements of a complex network?
2. What are the core elements of the complex apostolic network built by the Apostle Paul?
3. What is the relationship of these core elements to sustaining spontaneous expansion?
4. Why are these elements so critical to sustaining healthy, multi-generational, ever expanding church movements and networks?

## Postscript 2015

This encyclical was released almost six years ago, and we have learned many things about its implementation. First, it works with any model. The cell church, house church, and saturation church-planting movements (CPMs) can all add necessary additional elements to their incomplete strategies. Denominations can renew themselves into complex apostolic networks and recover the spontaneous expansion of their churches. Mega-churches can reconfigure their strategies and turn themselves quickly into complex apostolic networks and begin spontaneously expanding. Independent churches, large or small, can begin to spontaneously expand following the principles. Churches can work together in a city using complex networking and, while keeping their own identity, design a complex networking strategy for reaching an entire city through the spontaneous expansion of churches. Church networks, movements, and denominations can each build its own complex apostolic network and yet work together to reach a country. And together, with a strategy for translating the New Testament into the language of an unevangelized, unreached people group, the group can be reached by building a complex apostolic network from scratch. We have models emerging of each of the above all around the world, through building complex apostolic networks using BILD's training and resources.

Second, change comes hard. Most evangelicals in North America want to continue to “go to church” in a traditional way, hiding in the congregation

and failing to become all that God gifted them to be. In addition, if they do want to change, it does not happen overnight. It seems that about of church members really want the comfort of a single, Sunday morning church setting and do not want the expectation of playing their part in becoming equipped to participate in a church-planting movement, which grows out of a spontaneous expansion strategy. And with churches, change comes hard as well. Most churches focus on themselves. Most denominations focus on themselves. Changing the DNA to focus on expansion is threatening to most. Evangelical North American churches are more interested in individual success and token involvement in mission. However, we are seeing very significant change emerging with churches in our 30-City Urban strategy, when they learn about complex networking and are shown how to keep their own identity and yet work together to reach a city.

Third, it is easy for churches who are serious about building complex apostolic networks to build partnerships with various parachurch organizations. Once the churches are central again, many parachurch groups, most of which grew out of the churches' failure to do their jobs, can reconfigure themselves to deliver services through maturing, complex apostolic networks and be far more effective. We have several alliances emerging, in which complex apostolic networks take the lead and parachurch organizations deliver their services, reconfigured to truly serve a complex apostolic network of churches.

## Postscript 2020

*To appear in the 2020 edition of this booklet.*

## FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS IN BILD RESOURCES

1. *Acts: Keys to the Establishment and Expansion of the First Century Church*, the flagship course in BILD's Leadership Series I
2. *The First Principles Series III*
3. "Church-Based Leadership: Creating a New Paradigm," a paradigm paper by Jeff Reed

## SEMINAL BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

1. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* by Roland Allen (Eerdman 1960, originally 1910)
2. *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science and Everyday Life* by Albert-László Barabási (Plume, 2002)
3. *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* by Frank Viola and George Barna (Barna, 2002, 2006)
4. *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* by Peter Lampe (Fortress, 2003)
5. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* by Wayne A. Meeks (2003)
6. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* by Roland Allen (Eerdman, 1962, originally 1911)
7. *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* by Saskia Sassen