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SO, YOU WANT TO PLANT A CHURCH?

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So, you want to plant a church?

There's two things you *must* know.

YOU MUST KNOW ABOUT VOCATION

“**A**nd he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (Ephesians 4:11-12).”

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“**W**hatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:23-24).”

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William Carey is often known as the father of modern missions. He was a shoe cobbler by trade. This means he repaired shoes for a living. He did this as his job while preaching and preparing to live the missionary life in India. Because of the time he gave to his preaching ministry his shoe business began to suffer a bit. Seeing this, a friend of William's approached him reprimanding him for neglecting his business. Carey responded, “*Neglecting my business? My business is to extend the kingdom of God. I only cobble shoes to pay expenses.*”

We would consider Carey today to be bi-vocational or co-vocational, where he is working a non-church job to pay the bills while he pastors. Carey's response to his friend's concern reveals his view of his vocation, his job, his business. He understood making new disciples of Jesus was his business, and repair-

ing shoes is what paid the bills. Carey was in full-time ministry even while he cobbled shoes.

The Apostle Paul understood this as well. He too was co-vocational, making tents to pay the bills (Acts 18:3) while extending the kingdom of God. He too understood his business was making disciples of Jesus, and making tents is what paid his bills.

HERE'S THE TRUTH ABOUT VOCATION. You are in full-time ministry. Extending the kingdom of God where you live, work, and play is your business no matter what you do to pay the bills. Like William Carey and the Apostle Paul, if you want to plant a church, understand working to pay the bills is necessary but it's not your vocation, making new disciples of Jesus is.

The Apostle Paul and William Carey understood and showed by their example that regardless of what they do for a living they are in full-time ministry. I think we also know this for ourselves, but I'm not so sure we've done the best job of communicating this truth.

If you pay the bills by getting a paycheck from the church you lead or pastor, or from some side hustle, or from running your own company, remember, having a job that pays the bills is necessary. Your vocation is making new disciples of Jesus.

If you want to plant a church today you must know about vocation. The second is...

YOU MUST KNOW ABOUT CALLING

I*f anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil (1 Timothy 3:1-7)."*

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P*ay close attention to yourself (life) and to the teaching (doctrine); persevere in these things, for as you do this you will save both yourself and those who hear you (1 Timothy 4:16)."*

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“*Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29)."*

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D*o you know someone or have heard of maybe someone who is no longer planting a church, pastoring, or no longer in some form of church ministry because of some moral*

or character failure? Does anyone come to mind? How many come to mind?

When I asked this question to a room packed full of church planters and denominational leaders in Kentucky several years ago, nearly every hand went up. With hands raised I then asked, “If you know of more than one who’s left the ministry because of a character or moral failure raise your other hand.” More hands went up.

In the network of house churches we planted nearly 14 years ago, and are still a part of today, I can think of at least 10 different people whose dad, husband, uncle, brother-in-law were at one point pastors shepherding congregations, but then left or were asked to leave because of a moral or character failure. One of these is a dear friend of mine who I served alongside, but because of a moral failure sits in jail as I write this.

A few years ago I was having lunch with one of our house church pastors. He told me about a podcast he and some of his buddies had started listening to. The name of it was *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, produced by Christianity Today. It documents the story of Mars Hill Church in Seattle from its beginning in the early 2,000s to when they closed the doors back in 2014.

A few days after my lunch with this pastor, I was talking with my son, who was 19 at the time. He also shared he had started listening to this same podcast, and really wanted me to start listening to it as well. A few days went by, but I eventually decided to give it a listen and check it out.

In the initial episode, Ed Stetzer, who is like the “Yoda” of church planting in church planting circles, is interviewed for his analysis and thoughts on what happened with Mars Hill. During his interview, Stetzer made a statement that stuck me. He said,

“There’s a body count of young pastors whose ability rose them to prominence before their character was ready for it.” Read that statement again. Read it one more time. I share these stories with you because they are telling, and unfortunately affirm that Stetzer’s analysis is sadly on point.

Ability before character is the reverse from what the apostle Paul seemed to teach. When we read Paul’s words to Timothy describing the qualifications for pastoring or being a church planter (1 Timothy 3:1-7), he emphasizes character before ability. In the list of qualifications the only ability that seems to be mentioned is “able to teach”. Every other qualification has to do with a man’s character.

Later in that same letter to Timothy, Paul seems to summarize these qualifications into two words. He tells Timothy to, “Watch...your *life* and your *doctrine*” (1 Timothy 4:16). The word Paul uses for “watch” means to give you attention to, to take a firm grip, and not just once, but to keep on giving attention.

Paul is telling this young pastor or church planter, *“Listen, there’s two things you need to give attention to - Your Character. Your Doctrine. Those two things will not only protect you, but also those you’re discipling. You wanna have a ministry that impacts? Care about doctrine. Care about your character.”*

In that list of what to look for in a church planter or pastor Paul says a planter or pastor who is called is a man who gives attention to his marriage, his family, and is respected by unbelievers in his community just to name a few. He is man who is called to character.

Picture a door, a door with two hinges. One hinge is at the top and one near the bottom. I know, most doors have three

hinges, but go with me here, imagine just two. Imagine the door is your church plant, or your house church, or the people you're discipling, or the ministry God has given you. Imagine the top hinge is your DOCTRINE, the biblical truth you hold firmly to, and the bottom hinge is your LIFE, or your CHARACTER. For the door to work as it's intended both hinges are necessary. Same when it comes to planting a church, to making disciples.

For most of us, the top hinge pin of doctrine is solid. But what happens if the hinge pin of character is missing? You might have the hinge pin of doctrine functioning correctly, but without the pin of character the door is still ineffective. Your ministry has a problem if it's missing correct doctrine. Your ministry also has a problem if your character is missing.

Most of the people filling that room in Kentucky were people who had given amazing attention, even years and thousands of dollars to learning and getting the hinge pin of doctrine right. Listen, I'm all about biblical truth and being able to teach the Scriptures correctly. Paul instructs Timothy to work hard at teaching biblical truth (2 Timothy 2:15), and so should every planter, pastor, disciple of Jesus.

Many in the room were men and women who had years of seminary training with degrees affirming they hold tightly to biblical truth. Many I'm sure had ordination certificates affirming their correct handling of biblical doctrine. The problem in today's church planting and church leadership is NOT because our lack of attention to doctrine.

A recent Gallup Poll said less than 40% of people trust clergy. People no longer trust pastors. Can we blame them? We have watched our doctrine, but we have failed to give attention to our character, and it's affecting what people think of Jesus and His

Church! Our problem is not our attention to doctrine, but the lack of character in those teaching the doctrine. What does all this have to do with “calling”?

HERE’S THE TRUTH ABOUT CALLING. So you want to plant a church? Then you must understand your first calling is not to plant or preach, but being conformed into the likeness of Christ. You must understand that calling today looks like the calling of character, character which reflects Jesus.

What I’m about to say next is probably going to sting, especially if you’re someone who assesses church planters or serves on church and pulpit search committees. I’ve personally been through church planting assessments and here’s what I’ve found. We want to know if a planter is a gifted communicator before knowing if he gives time to prayer. People want to know if you can fundraise before they see if you have the fruit of the Spirit. People want to hear about your calling to plant or preach, before they ask about your calling to lead and shepherd your home. We ask for a copy of your latest sermon before we ask your kids what they think of you as a dad. We ask you to show us your strategy before we ask you if you have people in your home and what you think of the biblical qualification of being hospitable.

Church planter, your first calling is not to plant a church, but to follow Jesus. What your community, town, neighborhood needs to see is not another Sunday show, but a man, a woman whose character points them to Jesus.

One of my heroes is Robert Murray M’Cheyne. I never knew Robert, primarily because he lived during the 1800’s and in Scotland. But from what I’ve learned from reading about him and from reading his sermons is that he was an incredible pastor, who was deeply loved by the people he served. Robert also never mar-

ried, and tragically died at the age of 29. He also was a man who understood his calling of character.

Robert once said, *"My greatest need is my personal holiness. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sword clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, his instrument— a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is a mighty weapon in the hand of God."*

Wow. That's a twenty-something pastor with remarkable wisdom and insight into what his people needed from him. Your people need the same from you.

When I planted our church 14 years ago, I was in my mid-thirties. Since that time there's a lesson I've been discovering about myself in this journey of church planting and pastoring - the longer I've been in this, the less I crave wide and large and the more I crave deep. It's not that large is wrong, but what will make the most impact will not be how wide or large my ministry is, but the depth of the character of the man leading it.

Show me a disciple with character that reminds me of Jesus, and I'll show you someone called. You may only have 15 in your church plant after three years, but if you have character that points people to Jesus, then you are a pastor whose been lit with the fire of God's Spirit, because only He can produce that in you! The greatest gift other than the gospel you can give the people you're leading, which don't forget, includes your family, is not your ability, your strategy, your vision, your preaching, your building, but a life of character that looks like Jesus.

Most importantly, your character has the opportunity to be a billboard that displays Jesus to those you're praying to reach. A few years ago during the Christmas season, my wife and I, along

with our four kids, walked next door to our neighbor's house. Our neighbors are Muslim, and we were taking them a Christmas gift. By God's grace we've been able to build a wonderful friendship together.

Our neighbors have three kids, and we've been blessed to have them in our home a few times for a meal and other things. We've also shared nights around their fire pit together, and have been in their home too. So walking a gift over to them wasn't anything too unusual, and being invited into their home wasn't unusual either. We rang the doorbell, and they invited us in. We all sat on their living room couch, drinking tea. After a while, the dad asked our two teenage sons a question which was unusual.

He asked what they each thought about their religious faith and our parenting. Wow. To be honest, I was surprised by the question and a bit on edge wondering what our boys would say in response. It was one of those moments as a parent where you're holding your breath. As our boys each shared their answers and their own faith in Jesus, our neighbors marveled how our boys faith in Jesus was their own.

I share that story because it highlights how even when we didn't know it, our neighbors had been observing our parenting, our character, and even the character of our children. It was actually the character of our kids that led our neighbor to ask them questions which led to having a spiritual conversation about Jesus with them. The calling of character matters.

In the eleven years living next door to our neighbors they've never been to a house church meeting in our home. We've invited them for sure, but they've yet to come. They've not yet been to a Sunday gathering when all our house churches come together. We've invited them to those as well. But what they have been

doing is watching the character of our parenting, and our kids, and God has used that to spark spiritual conversations.

So you want to plant a church? If so, you must understand calling involves character, a character being conformed by God's Spirit to the image of Jesus.

SO, WHAT NOW? RUN!

After reading all this about vocation and character you may wonder what you should do next. Here's three things...

First, **RUN TO THE GOSPEL**. Some of you reading this are realizing the need for God's forgiveness because you've been dangerously playing with sin and it is killing your character and going to kill your ministry with your family, and those you're leading. I beg you to run to the gospel because it is there you find the arms of grace ready to receive you and wash you clean once again with His amazing forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

The gospel is what provides you forgiveness, it also is what trains you to "*say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age* (Titus 2:11-12)." So church planter, pastor, church leader, run fast to the gospel that saved you, for it is the same gospel that saves you that will produce in you, by His Spirit, the character necessary today. Remind yourself constantly of your need of His grace.

Second, **RUN TO ACCOUNTABILITY**. Remember King David? Remember when he cheated on his wife, and then killed the husband of his mistress to try to cover it up? Holy cow, what a mess. Do you remember the name of the guy God used to confront David in his sin? Nathan was his name.

Run and get yourself a Nathan. Go get some people in your life who will ask you the tough questions and can tell when you're lying to them. Invite them into your mess and give them permission to love you enough to call you out when you need it. *The name of Jesus is worth your holiness*. His Bride the Church

needs your purity, and a world that needs Jesus needs to see the difference He makes from the inside out.

Finally, **RUN TO THOSE WHO NEED JESUS.** We live in a culture where people don't trust church leaders. You have the opportunity to change that. You're not perfect and never will be this side of heaven, but the Spirit who lives inside you can conform your character to the image of Jesus. Your neighbors, town, community, co-workers, and family need to see how Jesus changes a life from the inside out. Don't underestimate the testimony of your character in a culture that lacks it. A man or woman transformed by the grace of Christ being conformed to the image of Christ is a more powerful display of the gospel than you might think.

CONCLUSION

So, you want to plant a church? There's two things every church planter must know when planting a church. The first is that you are in full-time ministry regardless of how you pay the bills. Your "business", like William Carey and the Apostle Paul, is to extend the kingdom of God making disciples of Jesus.

The second is understanding your first calling is to your character. Your character will be a powerful display of God's grace. You can have all the correct doctrine, but if the hinge pin of your character is missing your ministry has a problem.

So, you want to plant a church? Then...



“Give close attention to your life and doctrine. Persevere in them because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (2 Timothy 4:16).”

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT...

- How does understanding that your vocation is making disciples of Jesus impact how you view what you do to pay the bills?
- How can you help the people you're leading understand they are in full-time ministry regardless of what they do to pay the bills?
- If calling involves character before ability, how should that impact how you prioritize your time during the week?
- Which "*Run to...*" do you need to give the most attention to right now? Why?

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"My next step in response to vocation will be..."

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"My next step in response to the calling of character will be..."



About the Author

Mark Daniel Jones lives in Cincinnati, OH with his wife Andrea. Mark & Andrea have been married for thirty years and have four grown children. Mark has nearly thirty years of church and church planting experience having pastored and planted churches in Western Europe and the U.S. He has coached pastors and church planters for various denominations for over 12 years. Mark also has worked in the business world while pastoring and planting a house church network of churches called Living Church.

Currently, he pastors a house church in his Cincinnati neighborhood and helps lead and oversee Living Church, a network of multiple house churches in the Cincinnati & Northern Kentucky region. Mark also coordinates The Living Room, a network for leaders of house churches and microchurches from around the world.

Read more at <https://living-church.com/the-living-room/>.

