

Seven Deadly Sins -How to Kill a Church-Planting Movement

By David Garrison

The following is excerpted from *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*

Caught up in the enthusiasm of churches that seemed to be multiplying spontaneously among his beloved people group, a missionary exclaimed, “It’s amazing! We couldn’t stop it if we had to!” If only this were true. Unfortunately, Church Planting Movements can be stopped, dead in their tracks. Ironically, the very things we do to help these movements, often prove to be the poisons that destroy them. Over the past few years we’ve discovered more ways to kill a Church Planting Movement than we care to recall. But learning how to hurt a movement is the first step to healing one. Let’s identify seven of these deadly sins.

The First Deadly Sin: Blurred Vision “You can’t hit what you can’t see.” If you and your team are not passionately committed to seeing a Church Planting Movement, then don’t expect one to randomly appear. Just as God’s creation reveals his design, so too Church Planting Movements are permeated with visionary planning. Effective practitioners of Church Planting Movements have learned to clearly state and restate their vision. They revisit the vision whenever team members gather to discuss the work and review past progress or plan for the future. The vision and its fulfillment become the touchstone for evaluating all that the team does. Sharpening our vision is an exercise *of faith*, since faith is “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not (yet) see.”¹ Vision-casting invites us to see what is coming. If we can’t yet see the coming Church Planting Movement, we won’t know what actions are needed to usher in its existence. Church Planting Movement practitioners can believe, see, feel, and taste the movement well before it dawns into reality

The Second Deadly Sin: Improving the Bible

Improve the Bible? Think it can’t be done? Well, you’re right. So why do we keep trying? Through the ages, God’s people have tried to surpass this authority with cumbersome rules and regulations. Jesus condemned this in the Pharisees when he said, “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”²

Adding to the Bible’s requirements for Christian life resurrects the folly of the Pharisees. There are many ways to yoke new believers with extra-biblical legalities, but Satan knows that if he can distort God’s teachings on the church and on church leadership, he can stop the flow of new believers into the Kingdom of God.

The Bible intentionally keeps its prescriptions for church and leadership simple. Throughout the New Testament, Christ identified the church with himself. He foreshadowed this reality when he told his disciples, “Wherever two or three come together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”³ He later redressed Saul,

persecutor of the church, with the words, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁴ The converted Paul took the lesson to heart, seeing the church as the Body of Christ and identifying his followers as members of that Body.⁵

Being the Body of Christ deliberately ignores congregation size, seminary qualifications, mortgage-free property, or steepled buildings. It does speak of a standard of life, though, that is unsurpassed in human history.

So it should come as no surprise that the leadership of this “Christ community” is qualified by its relationship to Christ. Jesus chose disciples from a variety of vocations. The one thing they shared in common was Him. He spent three years walking with them, and this became their license to lead. We see that when the church chose a replacement for Judas Iscariot, the only requirement stated was that the candidate must have been with Jesus from his baptism to his ascension.⁶

In his letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of requirements for an elder or deacon, but these are offered as characteristics of a reputable Christ follower and should never be substituted for the ultimate test: Christ-likeness.

The Third Deadly Sin: Sequentialism

Sequentialism refers to thought and practice that follows linear, step-by-step processes. It’s natural for missionaries to think, plan, and act in sequential steps. First you learn the language, then you develop relationships with people, then you share a witness, then you win a convert, then you disciple the convert, then you start again. When you get enough converts, you draw them into a congregation and begin raising up leaders. Sequentialism makes perfect sense, but it is deadly to a Church Planting Movement. Sequentialism can take years to unfold, and like falling dominoes, the whole process comes to a halt if one plank fails to fall.

Church planting movements depend on practicing the end from the beginning. In these movements we see missionaries witnessing before the language is mastered. They practice house church with new believers, seekers, and co-workers. As they do this, they model and reproduce evangelism, discipleship, church formation, leadership development and missions.

Sequential paradigm missionaries speak of the time it takes to “lay a good foundation” as a prerequisite to reproduction. But time is not the precondition for a good foundation; sound doctrine and obedience to God’s Word are. In fact, when we delay multiplication of new churches in order to “go deep,” we inadvertently communicate to the new believers that the message we have is not really urgent or vital.

The Fourth Deadly Sin: Unsavory Salt

When Christianity compromises itself with sin, the result is unsavory salt—a faith that has “lost its first love.”⁷ Trying to grow a Church Planting Movement in the face of unsavory Christianity is like trying to raise wheat on a desert salt flat.

Conventional wisdom has told us that one should always work through the local church to reach a neighboring people group. But an unsavory local church is not a bridge to the lost, it is a barrier to the lost.

Unsavory Christianity reveals itself in three forms: cancer-ridden Christianity, contentious Christianity, and comatose Christianity. Sinful compromises with the world

that embed themselves in the community act as a black cancer, slowly sapping the Body of life and light. Contention is that age-old tendency among Christians to quarrel among themselves rather than turn to the needs of a lost world around them. A church that has turned inward and lost its love for and contact with the lost is nothing short of comatose. Its silent answer to the appeal of the Great Commission is a rhetorical, “Who cares?” Even in his own lifetime, the Apostle Paul saw the emergence of unsavory Christianity. He made it very clear how believers were to respond to those who had “a form of godliness (while) denying its power.” He told Timothy to “have nothing to do with them.”⁸

The best way to bring about change in a fallen expression of Christianity is by unleashing vibrant, living Christianity, free of sin, too busy to fight, and in love with a lost humanity.

The Fifth Deadly Sin:

The Devil’s Candy

To a hungry child the sweet taste of candy is irresistible, but that sugary burst of energy is no substitute for the kind of good nutrition required for long-term growth. In the same way there are sweet Christian virtues that Satan uses to seduce us away from a Church Planting Movement.

The Devil’s Candy is deceptive because it refers to good things that have real value, but if these good things keep us from our vision of churches planting churches, then they become a detour that we can ill afford.

One example of the Devil’s Candy is money. Money, though not inherently evil, is also not essential to Church Planting Movements, but it can produce a quick burst of energy. When a missionary’s hunger to see quick results prompts him to hire pastors and construct church buildings with foreign funding, he has bit the Devil’s Candy! Building a movement on foreign funds is like running a machine with an extension cord that stretches across the ocean. When the movement reaches the end of the cord’s length, it will abruptly stop. A Church Planting Movement must have an internal engine and internal fuel if it is going to flourish.

Letting a movement grow with its own leadership and resources may seem slower and riskier, but the risk is well worth the rewards. In his missiology classic, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, Roland Allen offered an instructive fable:

It is said that when God announced to the angels his purpose to create man in his own image Lucifer...cried: ‘*Surely he will not give them power to disobey him.*’ And the Son answered him: ‘*Power to fall is power to rise.*’ Lucifer, who had not yet fallen from heaven, began to desire to know that power....In the end, Satan achieved his

*greatest victories over man, not by pulling him down, but by inducing the servants of Christ to deprive new converts of the power to fall...so that he might deprive them of the power to rise.*⁹

Whenever we use subsidies to keep a church from falling, we unwittingly deprive the new church of *the power to rise*.

The Sixth Deadly Sin:

Alien Abduction

Our gospel's origins may come from out of this world, but Church Planting Movements are very much at home in their world. They don't have the smell of foreignness to them. Their leadership is local; they worship in the community's heart language; they meet in their own homes.

There are at least three ways that Church Planting Movements can succumb to alien abduction: 1) by forcing new believers to exchange their cultural forms for alien ones, 2) by creating a welfare state of foreign dependency, and 3) by injecting foreign elements into the life of the church that cannot be locally reproduced. Any one of these alien invaders can cripple a Church Planting Movement.

Church Planting Movements take on the appearance of their context. If villages build homes out of bamboo, then church buildings are made of bamboo. If the people live in small apartments, the Church Planting Movement will occur in small apartments. Missionaries who are successful in seeing a Church Planting Movement have learned to begin each church plant with the question, "Can this church be reproduced by these believers?" If the answer is, "No," then the foreign elements are identified and discarded or replaced with reproducible elements.

The Seventh Deadly Sin: Blaming God

Many practitioners of Church Planting Movements have concluded that the single greatest barrier to Church Planting Movements is blaming God for their absence. Certainly God is at the center of every Church Planting Movement, but there is also a place for human responsibility, a place that God reserves exclusively for us. When Christians complain, "I guess it's just not God's time for them," we abrogate this human element and put the blame on God. This form of divine dismissal is probably the most common excuse offered for not modifying our own behavior in relation to a Church Planting Movement. In the end, divine dismissal is still dismissal; it just sounds holier. Church Planting Movements are not unlike personal salvation. On the one hand, God has done it all, paying the price for our salvation through his Son's atonement. But he also calls on us to take this message to a lost world, and allows the lost a measure of freedom to respond to his saving gift. The same is true of Church Planting Movements; they are a divine-human covenant. God is in charge, but he reserves many crucial roles for us.

Perhaps you recognize some of these Seven Deadly Sins in your own ministry. Don't be dismayed. For every obstacle Satan puts in your path, God offers a bridge to overcome it.

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Footnotes

1 Hebrews 11:1

2 Matthew 23:16

3 Matthew 18:20

4 Acts 9:4

5 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Ephesians 4

6 Acts 1:23-26

7 Revelation 2:4

8 2 Timothy 3:5

9 Adapted from Roland Allen's *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 16-17.

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