

the ten commandments of nineteenth century church
planting by david w. hall

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The Ten Commandments Of Nineteenth Century Church Planting

by David W. Hall

Whenever I am asked to do a task about which I do not know very much, I find it helpful to look backward rather than forward. Sometimes that sounds contrary to our normal approach, for we all want to know the future. We often think that the future is the best determinant for successful action in the present. However, I have found that looking backwards at history can also offer guidance for the methods of the future. Even in something as practical as church planting, history can be our friend, and a helpful guide.

In particular, having been faced recently with a new presbytery assignment in church planting in an area of the southeast in the USA, and not being an expert on a particular methodology, I found it helpful to look backwards first to see where the Presbyterian Church in North America had some of its successful beginnings in church planting methodology. I would like to extract ten principles for church planting adopted by the Presbyterian Church at an early period of her life. While these "Ten Commandments of Church Planting" are assuredly not revealed from Sinai, nevertheless, I believe that they are exemplary and could be helpful in all situations.

The First Commandment is: "In our motive we shall have no other motive other than the Honor of the Lord our God." In 1791, as the American Presbyterian Church in her infancy began to consider domestic missions, or home missions, she considered sending missionaries to the "frontiers of our Country." The motive for such was stated in these words: "To carry into effect so noble a design we cannot doubt that all who have a supreme regard to the glory of God and the salvation of their fellow man will cheerfully contribute." Further, in that same historic statement of motive the 1791 General Assembly of the PCUSA said:

The honor of God, the eternal salvation of precious souls, the increase of the society to which you belong, and may we not add, your own peace and comfort, all conspire to prompt you to ardor in this generous undertaking. We are ready to anticipate the times, when by similar exertions to these, our holy religion will extend its influence over the vast regions of this

western continent, and songs of salvation be heard from its remotest corners; and is it possible that pious Christians, that friends to the best interest to the world, that men of public spirit, should withhold their aid in bringing forth so glorious an event?

Later they added,

Christians can you look around you and behold such multitudes of souls ignorant of that Saviour whom you love and through whom only they can be saved; ignorant of those truths so important to the happiness which you have received and even perishing for the lack of knowledge and not be willing to do everything in your power to rescue them from such a condition? Thus the Presbyterian Church at its outset stated that its conjunct motive for home missions or church planting was the supreme glory of God as well as the love of our fellow men. The first and inviolable commandment of older Church planting, is therefore: Thou shalt have no other gods before the Sovereign God in our efforts and motivations for church planting. That commandment rules out church planting motivated by guilt; in pursuit of success; church planting for the glory of man, men, or a particular organization; and any other kind of church planting that is not radically oriented toward the exclusive Glory of God. Our church planting must be directed to please God--not ourselves, and be for his glory alone. That is to be our supreme regard. In practice, that means that we shall often return to re-examine our motivation to certify that we are not seeking some other kind of glory. It is hard to pass over the opportunity to ask if modern church planting efforts might be more enduring if founded on this first, greatest, and doxological mandate.

Commandment #2: "Home Missionaries Shall Be Assigned By The Higher Court." In 1795, a few years later, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America appointed several missionaries. It is important to understand that these earliest missionaries were assigned or appointed; not free-lancers. They were far from independent Lone Rangers who went off on their own apart from the lawful jurisdiction of the proper church court. That is distinctive for Presbyterians, as compared to congregational attempts at church planting. The higher courts had that authority and that is where the practice of itineration saw its first gleams of light in American Presbyterianism. Further, in 1795 they appointed one John Porter for three months to set out from particular areas and visit a route.¹ The next year in 1796, to show that the church

was serious about that,² it was resolved that a Mr. Sample be recorded as having not fulfilled his mission according to the directions of the General Assembly as it appears from his own admission that his route had not been covered. This shows that the earliest Presbyterian church planting efforts in America operated under the accountability of the college of Presbyters. The second commandment of church planting is that home missionaries, church planters, will be under the authority of the higher courts and will be assigned certain areas and responsible for those itinerations. They will not act as independent contractors.

The Second Commandment of church planting involves accountability to the church courts. In the year 1800 (p. 208), the Minutes state that missionaries were to be employed for certain time periods and to cover certain routes of which they should, "Report annually to the Assembly of the manner in which he hath fulfilled the objects of his appointment; also the whole state of the frontier country in with regard of the number of organized churches, distinguishing between such as are able and willing to support a minister in a single united capacity." The point is that the early Presbyterian missions did not see themselves as independent, but rather they were accountable and organically related to the higher court.

Commandment #2 is also observed when one notices that these early Presbyterians desired to maintain a board or committee overseeing the whole of this work. In 1816, the Presbyterian Church raised the committee of home missions to the status of a commission and gave it a title, 'The Board of Missions' and in so doing they gave that missionary board some authority. At this early stage, it was realized that this important work, of necessity, must be overseen by a competent Board, which would also be accountable to the General Assembly. These church planters were connectional through and through - not independent. Else they would not have bothered with the accountability of such Board.

Commandment #3: "Church Planters Shall Possess Distinctive Qualifications." In 1799, as the maturation of the church planting movement in the Presbyterian Church was beginning, the 1799 Assembly (p. 183) stated these qualifications for church planters:

That those who carry out these missions ought to be conducted by men of ability, piety, zeal, prudence and popular talents; that missionaries should be employed in preaching the most important doctrines, the Gospel, commonly called the doctrines of grace,... that they organize churches when opportunity offers and administer ordinances; and they catechize and instruct from house to house as far as practicable ... that they refrain from all political or party

discussions of mind.

It was an understanding of the early church planting movement that certain qualifications would be needed for those who plied the trade of church planting full-time. Every minister of the gospel was not gifted to be a church planter. The Presbytery, as the visible steward of those gifts, was to employ those best qualified for these unique works.

Commandment #4: "Certain Target Areas Were Chosen." At that same General Assembly, in 1799 (Ibid), two sites were targeted. From that we can learn that it is always a good principle to set target sites, instead of randomly roaming the countryside, hoping that a church will just happen to begin. We infer from this, also that there must have been some strategy involved, along with designated targets of concentration. The first two sites chosen to be operating centers or target sites were Ft. Schuyler on the Mohawk River and Geneva on the Seneca Lake. It was also advised at this time that these home missionaries go out "two by two." We are able to see that early American Presbyterian church planting was intentional, strategic, and well-thought out (as opposed to haphazard, and unresearched), complete with demographically ripe potential targets.

The Fifth Commandment of nineteenth century church planting was that the reformed faith, or the doctrines of grace were to be unashamedly taught and proclaimed as central to the foundation of newly developed churches. It was not the case that these Presbyterians sublimated the reformed faith in these attempts; nor did they relegate that distinctively Presbyterian approach to the hinterlands. In fact, one of the geniuses of this church planting explosion was in that this missionary church was also a doctrinal church of great substance. Indeed a strong case could be made that one of the main causes of this unprecedented growth was because of - not in spite of - the overtly emphatic role of this distinctive "whole counsel of God." Our Presbyterian forefathers, who founded the church planting movement would not dream of planting churches which were less-than-Presbyterian. The 1799 General Assembly had already expressed its priority on the reformed faith in these words: "that the missionaries should be employed in preaching the most important doctrines, the Gospel, commonly called the doctrines of grace." Hence the early church planters did not view the specific doctrines of grace (a.k.a. the reformed faith) as embarrassing step-children to be shunned. As will be seen from the tenth commandment (below) the church planting effort grew the quickest during the Old School dominance -i.e., during the most doctrinaire time. Hearty doctrinal churches were planted by these domestic missionaries. It is a needed corrective to re-emphasize that the best and most lasting fruit of church planting grows from churches with a strong doctrinal root, which

resists the storms and fads du jour.

The Sixth Commandment is: "Thou Shalt Employ All Other Gifted Christians In This Work." Also in the year 1800 (p. 197) the General Assembly approved using an order of men called catechists. These early Presbyterians knew that many Christians other than ordained church planters were to be included in these frontier works. These "catechists" were not to be clothed with "clerical functions, but [they] confine themselves to the private instruction of those to whom they are sent." These catechists would be teachers who would go from house to house and minister to the families, they would be involved in a follow-up capacity and they would also be solid in the faith. Today we need good ruling elders and Sunday School teachers and other gifted Christians to assist in church planting.

The Seventh Commandment is that "Church Planting Efforts Shall Be Sensitive to Cross-Cultural Opportunities." At the heart of these earliest plantings was the desire to reach out to the American Indians (and later Blacks in the South). The very first domestic missionaries for the nineteenth century Presbyterian church were commissioned to go to the Indians. The church seized upon this cross-cultural opportunity, and made the most of it. Today, we would be wise to do the same. Many of the re-settled peoples and ethnic minorities are more open to new churches than many Anglos. We might do well to recall the faithful missions of one, say, like, the Rev. Gideon Blackburn, who labored for years in Kentucky and Tennessee, planting many churches, braving many dangers, and reaching out to hundreds of Indians.

Commandment #8: "Thou Shalt Draft Settled Pastors As Well." By the year 1839, there was both a growth in home missions but also an increasing need. In the General Assembly of 1839, only two years after one of the most serious splits in history of the young Presbyterian denomination, the church adopted a measure in which they would use settled pastors to make or serve as helpers in these itinerate tours. The Assembly passed this resolution (p. 167):

That in furtherance of this great work which is of equal importance to this Country, in its civil and religious aspects this assembly recognizes the great importance of itinerant missionary labors among the more destitute districts in the newly settled portions of our country, and would urge its necessity, not only upon the employed missionaries of the board, but also upon all pastors, who by an annual missionary tour of this character might render equal benefit to themselves, their churches, and to the church at large, and thus greatly extend the boundaries to the Kingdom of Christ.

Two years later (p. 444) the General Assembly said,

That until a sufficient number of suitable men can be found to occupy this field of labor [home missions], it is the duty of the churches enjoying regular pastoral labor, and of settled pastors, to take part in the work by devoting a portion of their time to missionary labor; and it is recommended that every Presbytery take order on the subject, and see that the burden of this work is equally distributed among its churches.

This was one of the strongest contributions of the nineteenth century model to church planting. It reflected great ingenuity and the true zeal to reach the nation, whatever it took. It may be that one of the things we can best learn from the nineteenth century church planting model is that we should employ even church pastors who are settled in this great work. It could be a wonderful challenge to denominations, or to whole Presbyteries, to ask each pastor to give one or two weeks (annually) of time released from his regular pulpit ministry for the spade-work, in the infant stages of church planting. Presbyteries could coordinate this effort, and find themselves with the capacity of an additional full-time church planter, if all pastors took their turn. This might be a quick solution to some pressing needs that suffer from lack of manpower. Here again, we can learn much from these fathers in the faith. We could also benefit from their use of various gifts within the same body.

Commandment #9 is that "The General Assembly Must Visibly Keep Church Planting Before the Churches as a Chief Concern." The early nineteenth century Assemblies did an excellent job at stoking the fires of interest for church planting. This can be seen dramatically in two ways. One of those is to note that from 1802-1826, nearly every Assembly set aside a unique time for "special prayer for the revival of religion."³ The General Assembly considered it its duty to keep this matter before the court as a matter of special prayer.

The second clue to the high importance of church planting to the Assemblies themselves can be seen from the types of Moderatorial Sermons preached at the commencement of the General Assemblies during this era. During the period of 1798-1806 the Assembly seemed especially interested in spurring on interest in the area of evangelism and extension. The Moderators of the Assemblies in those years, chosen as representatives of sentiment as well as respect, seemed concerned to publicly state the mandates for such extension, as for example:

- Wm Tennent (1798) preached on Mt. 28:20.

- Jn McKnight (1799) preached on 2 Cor. 2:16.
- S. S. Smith (1800) preached on Jude 3.
- Jos. Clark (1801) preached on Mt. 28:18-20 (Note repeat of 1798.)
- Nathaniel Irwin (1802) preached on Lk. 14:23.
- Jas. Hall (1804) preached on Rom. 10:1.
- Jas. Armstrong (1806) preached on Jn. 3:16-17.

This was quite a collection of evangelistic passages, and the Assembly did its best to keep the extension of God through church planting and evangelism regularly and visibly before the Presbyters in Assembly.

Also in 1839 (p. 167) the Assembly's mission statement was given in these words: "That it is not only the duty of this board to supply vacant churches with an intelligent, orthodox, and devoted ministry--not only to render assistance to feeble churches in supporting such ministry when enjoyed, but also to extend the boundaries of the church to organize new congregations and to establish churches in the hitherto neglected and waste places of the land." Home missions was seen as a great task and the extent of this field was in no way small. It was up to the General Assembly, as the expression of the entire church, to keep this concern visibly before its churches.

Commandment #10: "Thou Shalt Grow." The Presbyterian Church in the early nineteenth century had its most dramatic spurt of growth in home missions in its history using these methods. In more modern communions, we may be pleased with what God had done in our own situations, or even proud of the successes. However, compared to early nineteenth century growth, our late twentieth century successes are small. The Presbyterian Church went from zero home missionaries in the year 1800 to over 100 by the year 1830. The first home missionaries were appointed to reach the Indians. Soon other missionaries were added, and by the year 1810, there were 30 full-time ministers involved in domestic missions. By the next year, 1811, this number had risen to 40 (an increase of 33% in one year!), and by 1814, the corps of home missionaries numbered 51. Home missionaries went from:

0 to 30 from 1800-1810; from

30 to 40 by 1811; from

40 to 51 by 1814; and from

51 to 100 by 1830.

They went from zero to 100 in one generation!

However, in 1851, looking back on that previous 21 year period and from 1830 to 1850 inclusive, the 1851 General Assembly (p. 27) noted, "The increase of our missionaries from 101 to 570: The increase of our fund from \$12,000 to \$79,000 (a big chunk of change back in that day!): the organization of 943 new churches, the erection of 1,484 houses of worship, and the addition of over 40,000 souls to the missionary churches on profession of their faith. Such were the great results of an unprecedented 20 year spurt of home missions, which saw a nearly six fold increase. Maybe moderns could learn from these earlier models, and use their methods.

It should be also noted that this great increase happened during one of the most tumultuous periods of the life of the Presbyterian Church. There was a great division that had been brewing and was indeed consummated in 1837 between the Old School and the New School. Also the labor pains of the Civil War were commencing. Still nonetheless, despite all of these oppositions from within and from outside of the church, the church planting movement in early nineteenth century Presbyterianism exploded across the country, and despite all obstacles, she grew in a hitherto unsurpassed manner.

What can we learn from this? We can learn many things. Among those we can see a strong and vibrant church that was doctrinally centered and was doctrinally as sound as it has ever been. It was predominately an Old School era and it was also a church that was on the grow. It was a church that did not hesitate to put its faith in practice. It was a church that I dare say, has outgrown even our own church. May we learn much from this and employ these methods, particularly the use of settled pastors in the great works of church planting. These "Ten Commandments of Church Planting in the Nineteenth Century" should also become the "Ten Commandments of Church Planting in the Late-Twentieth and Twenty-First Century."

Finally phrase it this way: For those who consider numerical success and result-orientation, until this above era is surpassed, we should respect their methods. A healthy dose of paleo-correctness might be just what the doctor ordered for this, or the next, church expansion wave. How could we possibly ignore these great forward movements - of real evangelism, not merely transfer growth - of our earlier siblings?

The only justification for such ignorance is an arrogance that we are the best generation. A more humble approach might be to inquire of our parents and their methods, before we claim superiority.

Endnotes

1. p. 98 of Minutes.

2. Ibid., p. 113. Hereafter, page numbers in parenthesis are taken from the Minutes of the Presbyterian Church, unless otherwise noted.
3. Cf. Minutes 1789-1820, pp. 248, 269, 286, 322, 350, 375, 396, 412, 435, 519, 576, 605, 670, 698, and Minutes 1821-1838, pp. 68, 135, and 163.

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