

How the Church Starts and Grows in the New Testament

There are two primary ways a church is started in a new place. The first is when believers move to a new location. This might be due to persecution or by choice. As these believers enter a new city, they share the gospel and begin meeting with other believers. We see this example in Acts 8:1-8, where all the believers were scattered due to persecution, and wherever they went, they proclaimed the gospel, resulting in church growth.

The other way we see the church growing is when an apostle is sent out to a new location to proclaim the gospel. An apostle is someone who is sent for the purpose of spreading the gospel in places where a community of God hasn't been established. They function as missionaries. There is no biblical example of a pastor or church planter being needed to establish a church. In the prevailing model of the church, it is assumed that leaders are necessary to start a church, which could be a core team, elders, pastors, or church planters. However, this desire for human leadership at the beginning often stems from a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit's work.

We are not saying that teaching, shepherding, and protecting people are unimportant, but we can learn a lot by examining how churches were started and grew in the New Testament. Paul had no problem leaving people under the care of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus, and trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit. It was only during his return visits that he appointed elders. He never appointed pastors or church planters. The following is an example from the life of the church in Antioch (Syria) and how it was established through the church in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:37-47: Birth of the church - The church begins in Jerusalem. As God pours out His Holy Spirit, the crowd responds to the gospel with repentance and belief. After baptism, they start living as a family and gathering together.

Acts 4:23-31: Empowered by the Holy Spirit - When faced with persecution and hardship, they turn to God to fill them with the Spirit, giving them boldness and power to proclaim the gospel.

Acts 8:1-4: Believers scatter from Jerusalem due to persecution - The apostles remain in Jerusalem.

Acts 11:19-21: The church expands to Antioch - Believers share the gospel as they scatter from Jerusalem. Upon arriving in Antioch, many people believe the gospel.

Acts 11:22-24: The established church assists the new church - The church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to support the new work in Antioch. There is a clear relational connection between those who scattered and the church in Jerusalem.

Acts 11:25-26: New believers receive discipleship - Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch, and they stay for a year to teach and disciple the church.

Acts 11:27-30: People use their gifts to build up the church - Since these gifts may not yet exist in Antioch, believers from other cities come to encourage and strengthen the church. Their connection is relational, not organizational, with believers in other cities.

Acts 13:1: Disciples in Antioch identify as the church in the city - The church is established in Antioch. All believers are part of the church, likely meeting in multiple homes. (Acts 2:42-47, Acts 5:42, Col 4:15). It is not a collection of separate churches. Even if they meet in separate homes, they are one church in the city.

Acts 13:1-3: The church matures and sends missionaries to new cities.

- A variety of gifts start developing in the church, which are needed for its maturity (prophets and teachers mentioned in Antioch).
- God sends out Saul and Barnabas as pioneering apostles (missionaries) to new places.
- The purpose of people's gifts is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Acts 14:21-23: Elders appointed - Paul and Barnabas return to cities where they made disciples to appoint elders. Elders may not be present in every house church but are present in the city. Paul and Barnabas do not settle down to pastor the church.

Paul and Barnabas do not maintain control or authority over the churches. They appoint elders from among the mature believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to shepherd the churches in those cities. This pattern is observed in other cities (Titus 1:5). Elders are not appointed immediately; they emerge through the process of discipleship.

Acts 14:24-28: Paul and Barnabas return to the church in Antioch to encourage and strengthen it. They report all that God has done in other places. Paul continues to maintain a relationship with the church in Antioch, but he does not permanently stay there.

While there are nuances throughout the New Testament, the principles remain the same. Disciples preach the gospel, and new disciples repent, believe, and are baptized. Current believers train them to make disciples and function as the church. This happens in a relational manner and focuses on empowerment rather than control. The church matures, and a variety of gifts manifest themselves. Some members of the church go to other places to repeat the process. Even as the church grows in a city, it remains part of one unified church. They may meet in various locations but are one family with elders overseeing the church in that city. This pattern shows that more structured leadership comes later on in the life of the church and is not necessary right away.