For the Outsider: How Established Churches Can Innovate Like Church Plants

by

Luke Tyson Greer

Department of Doctor of Ministry
Duke University

Defense Date: October 6, 2025

Approved:

Dr. Will Willimon, Program Director

Dr. Curtis Freeman, First Reader

Kaitlyn Schiess, Second Reader

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This study investigates how established Protestant evangelical churches in Western contexts can apply principles derived from contemporary church planting to better engage and evangelize unchurched and non-Christian people in their communities. The analysis is situated within two persistent empirical realities: the sustained decline in church participation and Christian self-identification across the West, and the higher proportion of unchurched individuals participating in newly planted churches when compared with established ones.

The thesis draws primarily upon the works of Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, and Ed Stetzer, three influential figures whose writings collectively encapsulate key themes within contemporary Protestant evangelical church planting. Their respective emphases — *evangelistic impulse*, *entrepreneurial innovation*, and *contextual resonance* — form the interpretive lens for this study. Despite the diversity of their approaches, all three converge on these three main ideas regarding church plants' engagement with non-Christians.

From this comparative analysis, the study develops a conceptual framework organized around two intersecting ecclesial dimensions: the *Great Commandment–Great Commission* axis and the *Institutional–Organic* axis. This framework provides a means for church leaders to situate and consider the ministries and resources of their local churches. Moreover, it offers a catalyst for infusing effective evangelism and thoughtful contextualization in every sphere of church activity. In this way, the study contends that established churches can innovate like church plants, pushing their church's ministries both "up" into organic expression among the laity and "out" into mission to the community and world.

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1. Introduction

Two persistent church trends have motivated this study.[1] One is well-known: church attendance and membership are declining year-after-year and decade-after-decade.[2] The other is probably less widely recognized: church plants, on average, host a higher percentage of previously unchurched people in weekly services than do established churches.[3] Something about new church start-ups better resonates with the non-Christian and unchurched percentage of the population. Because church-decline trends have continued or accelerated, then all churches — new and old — will need to grow in their ability to connect with those in their communities who remain unaffiliated with any local church. It is this the position of this study that there are church planting mindsets and principles that established churches can adopt so that more people might have the opportunity to hear, understand, and believe the Christian good news. Furthermore, in this thesis I will present a framework to help initiate these insights in established churches.

While there are numerous ways that church planting has benefitted from the generosity and expertise of established churches, now, perhaps more than ever before in America's social and religious landscape, there is something that church plants can offer back to established churches. After more than two decades working in the Protestant church planting field — first as a youth minister in a church plant, then as a teaching minister in a church plant, and now as an executive working for a church planting non-profit — I have experienced and observed how

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[1] The "Data Trends" section below will go into more detail.

[2] Benjamin Wormald, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," *Pew Research Center*, November 3, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/. Research that demonstrates this decline is presented below in "Data."

[3] Lisa Cannon Green, "Church Planting 2015: Who Attends and What Attracted Them," Christianity Today, December 8, 2015, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2015/12/church-planting-2015-who-attends-what-attracted-lifeway/ Research that supports the effectiveness of church plants with non-Christian and unchurched people is surveyed below under the "Data Trends" subheading.

church plants adapt and learn, experiment with new ideas, craft messages, and galvanize diverse coalitions.

In this thesis, data showing a decline in church-going and Christian beliefs across the United States will be cited and summarized, as will studies demonstrating how church plants are generally more effective than established churches at drawing unchurched and non-believers into Christian faith and church community. The thesis will survey church planting literature, research, and training material from Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, Ed Stetzer, and others. It will also consider objections and concerns with evangelistic approaches, review relevant New Testament passages, and offer contemporary typologies of churches effectively connecting beyond those already within their congregations and out to their broader communities. Three volumes in particular — one each from Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer — will be used, although these will be supported by additional writings from them and others in the field of church planting. Bringing these components together, I will seek to extrapolate guiding *principles* more than particular methods. Finally, building on the understandings surfaced through a survey of these church planting thought leaders, I will present a framework that is adaptable for a diverse group of established churches to utilize to better relate to and draw in unchurched people in their communities.

If the broader declines in church participation and Christian self-identification are going to be stemmed or reversed, then established churches must also become adept at relating well to unchurched people. More importantly, effectual evangelization opens abundant life in Christ[4] for more of our neighbors, and it is a means for churches (church plants and established churches alike) to carry out their great co-mission with Jesus Christ of making new disciples.

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[4] John 10:10

1.1. Scope and Definitions

The analysis of this thesis has two steps: 1) to identify thinking and practices for relating with and drawing in unchurched people by surveying religious trends studies and the relevant works of three Western Protestant thought leaders, and 2) to extrapolate main principles into an adaptable framework for implementation by established churches to become better at reaching unchurched people in their communities.

1.1.1. Established Churches

While numerous churches, evangelical or not, might fruitfully utilize the resulting framework, this thesis draws primarily from churches and leaders who self-identify as evangelical. Throughout, references to "churches," "church plants," and "established churches" should be understood within the scope of Western, Protestant churches. Furthermore, this thesis does not intend to introduce a strategy for "church revitalization." Nor is it intended to introduce or summarize a new strategy for church planting. There are numerous volumes on these important subjects (revitalization[5] and planting). While some findings herein might be useful for the disciplines of church revitalization and church planting, the primary recipient for the framework put forth in this thesis is a stable, established church. Established churches that are healthy or relatively healthy represent the most untapped potential in reaching new people and generations with the Christian gospel. Why? Church plants are typically already focused on unchurched people, and churches needing a restart are typically ill-suited for taking on new initiatives or experimenting with new frameworks.[6] Therefore, the middle — established churches which are

[5] Also sometimes called "replanting" or "restarting."

[6] David Hobbet and Andrew Schuman, eds., *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050* (Bend, OR: Pinetops Foundation, 2018), 35, https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4245467/The%20Great%20Opportunity.pdf.

not in precarious positions[7] — offer the most opportunity for meaningful evangelistic resonance with those who are not yet part of the Christian faith or a local church.[8]

If this thesis is most relevant for relatively healthy established churches, then what does it mean for a church to be "healthy"? There are numerous tools to measure church vitality. While these tools offer variation in detail, assessment, and application, each identifies a number of areas or makers to measure a church's health.[9] A 2019 study sought to synthesize findings from a wide variety of such church health assessment tools in the US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand. The researchers identified "15 features of church vitality." They are: "community, *outward focus*, leadership, spirituality, worship, discipleship, prayer, vision, caring for the young, giving, open and flexible innovation, healing, diversity, beauty, and attendance."[10] The takeaway for this thesis is two-fold. First, across the literature on church health, "outward focus" is recognized as a marker of vitality. Second, while the findings of this thesis are not intended for a church that is on

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[7] Stetzer identifies these simply as "churches that desire change" contrasting them to "rigid, tradition-bound" churches. See Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply*, Second ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 20.

[8] Both Keller and Stetzer have also presented works akin to this thesis, attempting to reinvigorate existing churches and movements into a renewed sense of mission: Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again* (New York City: Redeemer City to City, 2020); Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Pub. Group, 2007), http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0743/2007299064-t.html; Virtually all of Hirsch's work is aimed at recovering the apostolic, outward-moving mission of the church. See, for example: Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, Revised and Updated edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013).

[9] For example, "The ChurchPulse Assessment," Barna Group, accessed March 21, 2025, https://barna.gloo.us/assessments-and-check-ins/churchpulse-assessment; "Vital Signs Assessment," The Unstuck Group, accessed May 2, 2025, https://vitalsigns.theunstuckchurch.com/; "Church Ministry Analysis," The Malphurs Group, accessed July 2, 2024, https://malphursgroup.com/cma/; Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, 4th ed (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2000); "Church Vitality," UMC Discipleship Ministries, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/church-vitality; "Health Areas Measured by the Healthy Church Survey," Christian Reformed Church, accessed February 4, 2025, https://www.crcna.org/HealthyChurch/about/health-areas-measured-healthy-church-survey; David Kinnaman, "A Framework for Thriving Churches," *Outreachmagazine.Com*, October 21, 2024, https://outreachmagazine.com/features/leadership/82205-a-framework-for-thriving-churches.html.

[10] Sam Sterland et al., "Vitality in Protestant Congregations: A Large Scale Empirical Analysis of Underlying Factors across Four Countries," in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, Volume 29*, ed. Andrew Village and Ralph W. Hood (BRILL, 2018), 204–30, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382640_012. Italics mine.

the brink of collapse, they are intended for any church that desires to see its outward, evangelistic effort become more intentional and more fruitful. Not all church plants are effective in reaching non-Christian and unchurched people.[11] Likewise, not all established churches are ineffective in reaching non-Christian and unchurched people. However, I contend that — given the (on average) higher percentages of unchurched people in church plants compared with established churches[12] — there are insights to be gleaned from the field of church planting and applied in established churches.

1.1.2. Culturally Western

The scope of this thesis is primarily concerned with the West, and America in particular.[13] Most examples are taken from Western geographies, and most of the sources are from Western cultural backgrounds. The datasets and research cited are overwhelmingly taken from studies conducted among churches and individuals in the United States. Demographically speaking, much of the conversation from key voices is concerned with people and places that are unchurched or "under-churched" when compared to the U.S. national average.[14]

1.1.3. Three Interlocutors

Three evangelical thought leaders of the past twenty-five years provide the key sources for church planting practice and theory: Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, and Ed Stetzer. Each of

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[11] See for example three established churches listed here has having a high conversion growth rate: Alan McMahan and Billy McMahan, "Beyond Numerical Growth," *Outreach Magazine*, October 9, 2023, https://outreachmagazine.com/features/77707-beyond-numerical-growth.html.

[12] See "Data Trends" section below.

[13] This thesis's scope is limited to the West, given the significant cultural differences across the East and the Global South. I use the descriptor "Western" culturally rather than geographically. In this way, mainstream culture in Australia and New Zealand, for example, is considered Western even though these countries are not in the Western hemisphere. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 26.

[14] A simple calculation of churches per capita provides a shorthand way of identifying areas that are under-churched. Keller has argued for a greater strategic emphasis on resourcing church planting for under-churched regions.

these authors has worked extensively in church planting, albeit in varied ways: Hirsch as an entrepreneur and speaker, Keller as a church planter and practitioner, and Stetzer as a church planter and theological school dean. All have authored books and articles about church planting, and all express acute interest in church planting playing an important role in meeting the current secularizing age. However, there are differences in their emphases and approaches, as discussed in this thesis. Other works from additional authors will also be discussed, but Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer are the main conversation partners. They have been selected not only because they have made significant contributions to church planting dialogue and practice over the last twenty-five years, but also because together they are representative of the prevailing ideas and practices in Western church planting.

1.1.4. Protestant Evangelical

In this thesis, the author and primary interlocutors share evangelical Protestant backgrounds. Discussions of evangelical identity far exceed the scope of this study.[15] For the purposes of this thesis, the primary identifier for the churches referenced and targeted is that they are *evangelizing*. My purpose is simply to acknowledge the ecclesial background from which this research arises. In this thesis, the evangelical background of key voices is expressed in this evangelizing sense, not in a contemporary American political sense.[16]

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[15] E.g. Timothy Gloege, "#ItsNotUs: Being Evangelical Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry," (A)Theologies, *Religion Dispatches*, January 3, 2018, https://religiondispatches.org/itsnotus-being-evangelical-means-never-having-to-say-youre-sorry/; Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); "Evangelizing" in some ways echoes the "conversionism" of Bebbington's quadrilateral, but dialogue about evangelical definition exceeds the scope of this thesis. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 1989), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=179445.

[16] The writings of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer support this framing of their positions: *Alan Hirsch: The Church Needs To Stop Making Jesus in Its Own Image*, directed by ChurchLeaders.com, 2022, 42:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjgCz62StVE; Timothy Keller, "Tim Keller on the Decline of Evangelicalism (Part 2 of 4)," *Life in the Gospel*, January 25, 2022, https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-decline-of-evangelicalism/; Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2018); For another, important insider critique of evangelicalism, see Soong-

With the identifier of "evangelizing," I simply mean those churches and leaders who self-identify as such by their commitment to reaching people with the good news of the Christian gospel. These churches and leaders operate with the belief that the biblical portrayal of Jesus Christ and his mission is accurate, that changing one's allegiance and discipleship from whatever or whoever else to Jesus is inherently good, and that actively pursuing this good for others' sake is loving. These values pervade conversations in many Protestant churches surrounding missions and church planting, including the sources used in this study. Herein, when I or other authors write of churches "reaching people" or of Jesus "saving people," it is meant positively within this ecclesial backdrop. In this context, evangelism and winsome persuasion are considered loving virtues, not selfish manipulations. As with any institutional or historic value, outcomes would be destructive rather than edifying if employed ineptly or cynically.

1.1.5. Unchurched, Etc.

A number of terms have entered the vocabulary of researchers and church leaders to describe those who do or do not participate in church services or adherence. Pew Research Center and Ryan Burge helped to bring the term "nones" to prominence.[17] Within Protestant circles, Barna has popularized other terms to help further slice churchgoers and those who do not attend: active, churched, unchurched, dechurched, neverchurched, secularized, and additional subcategories.[18] In this thesis, the terms "unchurched" and "non-Christian" are used as blanket identifiers to describe anyone who is not involved in a local church. These terms have been

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Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), http://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE004438511.

[17] "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation," in *Sociology of Religion*, 3rd ed., ed. William A. Mirola, Michael O. Emerson, and Susanne C. Monahan (New York: Routledge, 2018), 28–49, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315177458-4; Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going* (Fortress Press, 2023), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE010955955.

[18] "Glossary of Barna's Theolographics & Demographics," Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/glossary/.

chosen because they include both faith and the congregational components. Unless otherwise noted, they are used interchangeably throughout this text. The desired outcome is that more people would encounter a resonant gospel message and a vibrant community through local churches in their context. Therefore, the categories and subcategories of churchgoing have been collapsed simply into "unchurched" and "non-Christian."

In summary, if the decline in adherents to the Christian faith (in general) and participation in local churches (in particular) are to be slowed or reversed, then church plants alone cannot be the only church expressions that relate well to the unchurched. Established churches must also become more adept at communicating with, resonating with, and drawing in the non-Christian populations in their communities. Extrapolating core principles from the works of three evangelical church planting voices will provide the basis for a framework that established churches can use to better evangelize those who are not yet a part of any church.

1.2. Author Background

Since 2002, I have served vocationally in the field of church planting. Shortly after graduating from college, I served as a youth minister and missionary in a church plant in south-central Mexico City. This experience built on my intercultural work as a summer ministry resident in a church plant in Bangkok, Thailand. Most of all, it further introduced me to church planting, opening my eyes to how new churches could be effective in "opening a door to the gospel" to new people and new generations.[19]

Before moving to Mexico City, I had already been convinced of the importance of Christian missions, and the first few years of working alongside church plants that were serving both physical and spiritual needs showed me how church planting could serve as a centerpiece to

[19] See 1 Corinthians 16:9ff for more on this church planting motivation from one of the world's first church planters.

mission work. After five years in this youth ministry position and finishing an MA in Intercultural Studies at Wheaton College, I returned to Mexico City to plant a new church. I joined a multinational team on the northern edge of the Mexico City Valley. I served as the primary preaching voice on Sundays and as a leader in home groups. Over the next five years, another church was planted.

This experience reinforced in me that starting new churches is one of the most effective ways for unchurched people to encounter and engage with the Christian faith. At the time, I did not know that other missiologists and practitioners had observed and written about the efficacy gap between church plants and established churches in reaching new people. As mentioned above, this thesis will introduce and discuss some of these.

From the Mexico City Valley, I took a new position with a New York City-based church planting organization and moved to the East Village neighborhood of Chicago. My role was directing a partnership with regional Bible and ministry colleges. I administered for-credit course intensives that would take place in New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco that introduced undergraduates to urban church planting. After three years of building up this program, I became more directly involved with the church plants the organization served. I took on the role of ministry partnerships, helping church planters build connections with existing churches and creating boards for financial, advisory, and spiritual oversight.

Through this role, I have directly helped more than forty new churches during their first few years to gather the resources they need and establish the accountability structures they require. I have served on boards at church plants in Miami, Chicago, Cape Town, Lagos, Istanbul, and Bucharest—in all but one of those as chairperson. In addition to my full-time role of partnership development for church planting, I have also served as teaching pastor in a Chicago church plant, and I now serve as an associate pastor in an Oakland, California church plant.

These experiences — even from the handful of church plants that have not survived — underline the cornerstone of what drives this study: church plants effectively introduce new populations to the Christian gospel. Eventually, as I was helping to create partnerships between established churches and church planters for fundraising and board formation, I began to ask myself if there might be a way for established churches to employ some church planting principles to better reach unchurched and non-Christian people. I also heard from established church leaders who shared how helping to start new churches was, in turn, positively affecting their own strategy for their own communities.[20]

Like the church plants where I have served, this thesis will draw on church planting voices and literature primarily from an evangelical background. A survey of research studies will provide a statistical backdrop for understanding trends in church participation, and a survey of primary church planting texts of three key voices (Timothy Keller, Ed Stetzer, and Alan Hirsch) will each provide insight into specifics about church planting issues and practice.

1.3. Three Key Voices

The last thirty years in American evangelicalism have seen a renewed emphasis on church planting. Books, conferences, podcasts, and curricula have spawned, as well as new services companies seeking to help new church startups with everything from tax law and incorporation to audio/visual and social media. Despite this propagation of material, the dialogue among practitioners and theorists alike has primarily centered on one or more of the following three issues: preparation and practical guidance for church planters, the statistical decline in

[20] *75 Years*, produced by Luke Greer, directed by Paolo Hugo, with David Meyer, 2023, Digital Video, https://orchard.group/75.

churchgoing as a strategic motivation for church planting new churches, and church planting as an opportunity to address the growing unchurched percentage of the population.

While these three themes overlap, some of the primary interlocutors have tended to emphasize one or another. Three evangelical thought leaders whose contributions have persisted through three decades are Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, and Ed Stetzer. Here, I will summarize some of their major ideas regarding church planting and its motivation. Later, I will excavate their primary church planting works for insights specific to relating to the unchurched or non-Christian person.

1.3.1. Alan Hirsch

Hirsch has made a persistent case for church leaders to think beyond starting new churches toward fostering new Christian community movements. Groups like Forge, founded and led by Hirsch, accentuate the importance of ecclesial adaptation to engage culture in more incarnational and missional ways. He and others are critical of comfortable "Christianity" not merely on theological grounds but on strategic ones. As the broader culture eschews a Christian worldview, culturally normalized churchgoing no longer provides churches with meaningful engagement with their broader communities.

Hirsch's varied background — born into a Jewish home in South Africa, grew up in Australia, and became a Christian as a young adult — gives him a broad perspective on church expression. He is best known for his innovative takes on missions to the Western world and for his APEST (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, Teacher) model and assessment.[21] In addition to writing and speaking, he is a serial entrepreneur, having founded several

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[21] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* (Brazos Press, 2016), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE007675154; "What Is APEST?," accessed October 18, 2024, https://www.theforgottenways.org/what-is-apest.aspx.

organizations.[22] The throughline in much of Hirsch's writing and work is the creation of Christian missional movements for and among non-Christians in the West. Hirsch argues that only by creating mission *movements* — moving beyond merely expanding and planting churches — can Western populations truly hear, engage, and be won to the Christian Gospel. This movement-making requires what Hirsch calls the "forgotten ways" of "apostolic genius" — making disciples, taking advantage of organic systems, living simultaneously missionally and incarnationally, and creating what he calls *communitas.*[23]

Hirsch emphasizes an organic, incarnational church expression more than an institutional one. He argues this occurs in and through apostolic leaders being identified and unleashed to do what they are gifted to do: step out of the norm. While Hirsch does not argue that any of the APEST roles are more important than the others, he does advocate for more intentional utilization of leaders with the apostle, prophet, and evangelist gifting — gifts he contends have been too often relegated by traditional churches and systems.[24] These leaders are motivated to innovate, to immerse themselves in local cultures, and to cultivate new Christian communities from within. Central to Hirsch's critique is that too much institutional church leadership is consolidated in shepherd- and teacher-type leaders. The natural sensibilities of prophets and evangelists, catalyzed by apostles, are exactly what is needed in the current age to reinvigorate churches and reconnect the culture with Christianity.

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[22] "About," Alan Hirsch, December 13, 2015, https://www.alanhirsch.org/about.

[23] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 222.

[24] Hirsch and Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 214.

1.3.2. Timothy Keller

Other voices also recognize the need for church planting to address cultural change, though they place greater confidence in institutional church expressions.[25] Almost certainly the most well-known among these is Timothy Keller, who planted Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan in 1989 and served as its senior minister until 2017.

While Keller is best known for his sermons and his leadership at Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, he was also deeply involved in starting new churches and advocating for church planting. He has shown particular concern for areas like New York City's boroughs, which are often overlooked in mission strategies and budgets due to their high costs and perceived resistance to gospel outreach.[26] Redeemer itself began as a church plant when Keller moved his family to Manhattan in 1989 to start a new church there. Keller's public ministry can be divided into three distinct but overlapping areas: preaching and teaching (beginning with Redeemer Presbyterian and continuing through the Gospel in Life initiative); seeking to catalyze a doctrinal unity movement among theological conservatives (The Gospel Coalition); and advancing church planting efforts (starting at Redeemer Presbyterian and expanding through City to City).

While these three have different emphases and audiences, there is a great deal of interplay between them. The term "gospel-centered" likely best captures what Keller sees as the unifying theme across the three areas. This thesis will focus less on Keller's preaching at Redeemer and his doctrinal vision through The Gospel Coalition (TGC), and more on his contributions to church planting, particularly through the organization City to City (CTC). CTC

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[25] Some organizational examples of this are the aforementioned City to City, Acts 29, and 9Marks.

[26] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 324.

has helped to establish church planting hubs in cities around the world.[27] These hubs vary by city and culture, but most help to provide ongoing training through cohorts of church planting peers. CTC's mandate has evolved from primarily offering training cohorts to emphasizing the catalyzation of citywide church planting movements.[28]

These concentrations (training and movement-making) have their roots in Keller's thinking and teaching. Redeemer's church planting ministry would eventually grow into CTC. Likewise, Keller articulated much of his thinking in a series of lectures and articles produced at Redeemer, with contributions from other staff members.[29] These lectures, with input from other Redeemer staff members, were codified into the Redeemer Church Planter Manual, which guided facilitators and educators of small groups of church planters in New York City.[30] Later, the core ideas tested through Redeemer Presbyterian's church planting efforts and refined through collaboration with other church planting leaders were adapted into the book *Center Church*. CTC's current emphasis on 'movements' is directly influenced by Keller's writing on 'movement dynamics' in *Center Church* and his related articles and talks.[31]

Throughout the evolution of these initiatives, there are clear throughlines. First, Keller repeatedly emphasized the necessity of Christian church planting to be gospel-centered, meaning that "churches examine all that they do in light of the gospel of grace."[32] Whether starting new

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[27] "City to City Europe," City to City Europe, accessed August 21, 2024, https://www.citytocityeurope.com; "City to City North America," City to City North America, accessed November 1, 2022, https://citytocityna.com; "City to City Asia Pacific," City to City Asia Pacific, August 8, 2020, https://citytocityasiapacific.com.

[28] "CTC Training," Redeemer City to City, accessed October 1, 2024, https://redeemercitytocity.com/ctc-training.

[29] This has been relayed to me from church planting leaders who lived and worked in New York City at the time and attended these lectures.

[30] Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Church Planting Center, 2002).

[31] Timothy Keller, "Defining a Gospel Movement," *City to City*, May 9, 2018, https://medium.com/redeemer-city-to-city/defining-a-gospel-movement-c4f591e919b9.

[32] Keller, *Center Church*, 330.

churches or catalyzing new movements, nothing less than a grounding in the good news about Jesus would suffice for the mission's longevity and fruitfulness. According to Keller, this begins with the church or movement leader's posture: they must be awestruck by the beauty and comprehensive nature of the Christian gospel.[33] Second, Keller strongly and persistently advocated that effective Christian communication must resonate with the culture. This was reflected most readily in his own preaching, which became known as compelling even to skeptical New Yorkers.[34] Keller promoted contextualization that addressed people's everyday questions and presuppositions. His preaching and writing used the Bible to answer those questions and engage those presuppositions. Furthermore, he exhorted other Christian leaders to do the same, particularly those in post-Christian contexts.

1.3.3. Ed Stetzer

Other voices in the field of church planting have largely been explainers of its various movements and trends. For example, the Exponential Conference and NewChurches.com have served as centers for the collection and dissemination of church planting practices and ideas. A leading individual in this arena is Ed Stetzer.

Stetzer has written on a wide range of topics related to church life and ministry, but his recurring focus is helping churches navigate contemporary challenges. He has served as a church planter, director and researcher at Lifeway Research, interim minister at churches in Chicago and Southern California, and academic at Southern Seminary, Wheaton College, and currently as

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[33] Timothy Keller, "Ministry Can Be Dangerous to Your Spiritual Health," Redeemer City to City, January 1, 2007, https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/ministry-can-be-dangerous-to-your-spiritual-health.

[34] David Brooks, "Tim Keller Taught Me About Joy," Opinion, *The New York Times*, May 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/22/opinion/tim-keller-death.html.

dean at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University.[35] His ministry career began as a church planter in Buffalo, New York.[36] Despite the variety of his work, speaking, and writing, a consistent theme is his commitment to helping churches thrive in a changing cultural environment. His books have primarily focused on church planting as a method and means of meeting the cultural moment. He is concerned with the downward trends shown by research, and his work frequently elaborates on these trends, making proposals to help reverse them. He has also been instrumental in original research.[37] Taken together, Stetzer's strongest contribution may be his role as a synthesizer of information and ideas for the benefit of the church.

Stetzer's primary text on church planting has been revised and expanded twice.[38] In it, he puts forth a practical guidebook for those interested in church planting. Stetzer identifies both broad cultural shifts and internal dynamics within churches and church plants. He demonstrates how an urgent commitment to church planting can address the cultural moment marked by declining Christian belief. True to his practice of synthesizing information across a broad evangelical base, he does not advocate for only one mode of church planting. Instead, he offers summaries and healthy examples of various church planting models. He takes a similar approach when introducing assessment tools, church structures, and leadership styles. Rather than strongly

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[35] Brenda Velasco, "Biola University Appoints Ed Stetzer as Dean of Talbot School of Theology," Biola News, February 21, 2023, https://www.biola.edu/blogs/biola-news/2023/press-release-biola-university-appoints-ed-stetzer-as-dean-of-talbot-school-of-theology.

[36] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 5.

[37] Edward Stetzer and Warren Bird, "The State of Church Planting in the United States: Research Overview and Qualitative Study of Primary Church Planting Entities," *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 19, no. 2 (2008): 1–42.

[38] Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Post-Modern Age* (Broadman & Holman, 2003); Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Broadman & Holman, 2006), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE004312683; Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*.

advocating for one model, he presents best practices from a variety of groups, denominations, and networks.[39]

While Stetzer brings together a variety of sources and information, he still communicates a clear value for evangelizing the lost and a strong desire for healthy, growing churches. He explicitly presents evangelism as a core motivator for church planting and missions. Meanwhile, his emphasis on church growth is more implicit, conveyed through data on growth trends and discussions of demographic targeting and strategies.

1.4. Two Data Trends

As mentioned above, there are two primary trends that have sparked this thesis: decline in church attendance and Christian belief, and the higher percentage of non-Christian and previously unchurched people in church plants compared to established churches.

1.4.1. Decline in Churchgoing

There is ample research that shows the decline in religious affiliation and churchgoing.[40] In fact, over the past twenty-five years,

> about 40 million people have stopped attending church. More people have left the church… than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined.[41]

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[39] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*.

[40] *Religion* (Gallup, 2023), https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx; Travis Mitchell, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/; Mark Chaves et al., *Congregations in 21st Century America* (National Congregations Study, 2021).

[41] Jim Davis and Michael S. Graham, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?*, with Ryan P. Burge and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2023), 5.

In 2002, 60 percent of Americans said religion was "very important" to them. By 2023, that figure had fallen to 45 percent.[42] From 2007 to 2019, people who identify as "Christian" fell from 78 to 65 percent, while those identifying as "none" grew from 16 to 26 percent.[43] The average church attendance at all weekend services was 90 in 1998 and 68 in 2019.[44] These and other statistics have become commonplace in ecclesial publications and denominational meetings.

While this decline is serious, there is some reason for hope. First, there appears to be the first signs of a renewing interest in Christianity[45] as well as a rise in church attendance among the millennial generation.[46] It appears too soon to tell whether this is trend or an outlier, but these are encouraging signs. Furthermore, Ed Stetzer has cited an openness among non-Christians to have conversations about faith, saying "79 percent of unchurched people said they would engage in a faith conversation if asked."[47] Both the trends of decline and the signs of hope support the thesis of this study: that there are opportunities for established churches to fruitfully engage the unchurched and non-Christian populations in their communities.

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[42] *Religion*.

[43] Travis Mitchell, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

[44] Chaves et al., *Congregations in 21st Century America*.

[45] Gregory A. Smith Fahmy Alan Cooperman, Becka A. Alper, Besheer Mohamed, Chip Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Asta Kallo, Jeff Diamant and Dalia, "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off," *Pew Research Center*, February 26, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/.

[46] "A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance," Barna Group, August 4, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022/.

[47] Ed Stetzer, "Practical Ways to Awaken Evangelism in Our Churches," *Outreach Magazine*, August 8, 2019, https://outreachmagazine.com/features/evangelism/45102-practical-ways-to-awaken-evangelism-in-our-churches.html.

1.4.2. Higher Effectiveness with the Unchurched in Church Plants

In 2002, Timothy Keller wrote an article advocating "a vigorous and continued approach to church planting."[48] In it, he gave the most important reasons for churches and Christian organizations to strategically engage in church planting. Among those reasons, he cited studies showing that 60 percent or more of new members in a church plant were previously unchurched. Churches 10 years and older, in contrast, gained only 10-20 percent of their members from the unchurched population; the rest were transfers from other churches.

In 2015, in one of the most comprehensive national studies on church planting, Lifeway Research (then headed by Ed Stetzer) drew similar conclusions regarding church plants' greater capacity to reach non-Christian and unchurched people.[49] Researchers found that 42 percent or more of attendees of church plants were previously completely unchurched or had been unchurched for many years,[50] making church plants far more effective than established churches at drawing in people who are new to Christianity and to church.[51] This study has been cited widely across other papers and books.[52] Unfortunately, no comparable national church planting study has been conducted across different groups and denominations since 2015.[53]

Nevertheless, this evangelistic advantage of new churches can be extrapolated from other and more recent studies as well. Len Tang, director of the Fuller Church Planting Initiative, has

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[48] Timothy Keller, "Why Plant Churches?," *Redeemer City To City*, January 1, 2002, https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/why-plant-churches.

[49] *The 2015 National Church Planting Study* (Lifeway Research, 2015), https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/2015-11-23-CP-USA-National-Report-Final.pdf.

[50] Lisa Green, "New Churches Draw Those Who Previously Didn't Attend," Research, *Lifeway Research*, December 8, 2015, https://research.lifeway.com/2015/12/08/new-churches-draw-those-who-previously-didnt-attend/.

[51] "Study: New Churches Draw Those Who Previously Didn't Attend," *Lifeway Newsroom*, December 8, 2015, https://news.lifeway.com/2015/12/08/study-new-churches-draw-those-who-previously-didnt-attend/.

[52] For example, Hobbet and Schuman, *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050*.

[53] There is at least one other large study by Warren Bird, but it does not ask questions about previously unchurched attendees or members. See, Warren Bird, "The New Faces of Church Planting and Multisiting," *EFCA*, 2022.

also observed that church plants are "far more effective at winning people to Christ than established churches."[54] Citing annual baptism numbers from the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest church planting organization in North America, by number of churches started annually) outlined in the convention's 2018 annual report, Tang shows that the church plants have a 67 percent higher baptism-to-attendee ratio.[55] Baptism figures provide a good proxy for understanding a church's resonance with unchurched people because there are naturally fewer converted among the unchurched than from those transferring from another church. The latest Southern Baptist Convention annual report also shows church plants outpace established churches in baptizing new believers. Notably, 27 percent of all baptisms in the U.S. outside the southern states come from new churches, despite the average age of churches in these regions being 47 years.[56] In sum, church plants are consistently more effective at reaching and engaging non-Christian and unchurched people in their communities.

1.5. Summary

Whether the dialogue is more about 1) preparation and practical guidance for church planters, 2) the statistical decline in churchgoing as a strategic motivation for church planting, or 3) church planting as an opportunity to better address the growing unchurched percentage of the population, the interlocutors above share an evangelistic concern for people who have not encountered a resonant account of Christ or a comprehensible Christian community. Each has dedicated a significant percentage of their vocational lives to helping churches become better at connecting with unchurched people. Each recognizes the existential threat to churches that

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[54] "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories," *Fuller Magazine*, November 29, 2023, https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/church-plants-as-evangelism-laboratories/.

[55] *Fuller Magazine*, "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories."

[56] *Annual of the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention* (Indianapolis: Southern Baptist Convention, 2024), 131.

declining church participation represents. Importantly, each strongly advocates for the establishment of new churches and church movements as critical for reaching the growing number of people unaffiliated with any Christian church. Yet, each brings a distinctive approach. Keller is primarily a preacher and institution-builder. Hirsch is primarily a prophet and entrepreneur. Stetzer is primarily a synthesizer and advocate.

While there are differences in their approaches to establishing new churches, they all share the same Christological mission to "seek and save the lost."[57] In fact, planting churches and reversing church decline are of secondary importance; these are only the methods and outcomes of helping people to encounter and believe the Christian gospel. All three express the importance of movement-making, with Keller investing most in the institutional church, Hirsch primarily in organic expressions, and Stetzer offering examples and typologies of all the above. In different ways, all three stress how church planting and church planting movements are expressions of Jesus's Great Commission. Each emphasizes the critical nature of gospel proclamation and understanding. Each communicates the need for church plants not only to proclaim the gospel verbally, but also to engage in meaningful, understandable, and (often) sacrificial actions toward the broader community. All three grapple with how to balance institutional structures and organic expressions of church life.

Keller's legacy leaves behind some enduring institutions. He is ultimately optimistic about institutional ecclesial forms adapting and thriving in the current age. However, as demonstrated in his writing on movement dynamics and in his practice (e.g., City to City's hands-off approach for creating new city hubs), Keller recognizes the importance of grassroots initiatives to support and create new institutions. Hirsch's approach is more prophetic: lamenting

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[57] Luke 19:10 from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989).

ways that many churches have become culturally comfortable and putting forth the "forgotten ways" of apostles and prophets. His critique that too many Christians are culturally assimilated into comfortable and comfort-seeking lives is both accurate and stinging, and his advocacy for an organic, grassroots approach to mission is pervasive. Finally, Stetzer's presentation of varied models is practical, and his partiality toward what helps church plants grow numerically is pragmatic.

These three are not the only voices in evangelical church planting over the last twenty-five years, and this thesis will engage others as well. However, these three continue to be heavily cited, and together, they are representative of the main thrust of Protestant church planting dialogue in recent decades. In the next chapter, I will begin to draw out the main principles from these voices that relate to the efficacy of church plants among unchurched people. These principles, in turn, will help form a framework that healthy, established churches can use to better reach those in their communities who are not yet Christian believers or active participants in a local church.

2. Exploration

Having established the purpose of this study — that the field of church planting offers established congregations vital insights for engaging non-Christian communities — I will now move to an exploration of the three thought leaders. The analysis which follows is not intended as a comprehensive regurgitation of everything that Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, and Ed Stetzer have to say about church planting. Rather, it is a focused exploration of how each of these influential thinkers conceives the mission of church planting with particular regard to reaching the unchurched. As shown above, Hirsch has argued the future viability of the Western church is bound up with recovering its identity as a dynamic, movement-oriented community rather than as a static institution. Keller likewise maintains that church plants are disproportionately effective in evangelism compared to established congregations, thereby underscoring church planting as an especially effective form of evangelism in reaching post-Christian contexts. Stetzer, from a practitioner-scholar perspective, frames church planting as essential for advancing the Christian gospel, especially as cultural shifts push the church further toward the margins of society.

To draw meaningful conclusions, this thesis deliberately engages the works of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer through a single lens: what they each identify as important for church plants to fruitfully engage those outside the Christian faith. To that end, three principles emerge across their writings: evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance. Evangelistic impulse highlights the church's missional identity, its posture as a sent community animated by the Great Commission rather than by maintenance concerns. Entrepreneurial innovation reflects the capacity of church planters to experiment with forms, structures, and strategies that disrupt inherited practices for the sake of removing barriers to understanding and belief. Contextual resonance stresses the importance of communicating the gospel in local

cultures in ways that are both faithful and intelligible, helping the Christian message of to be heard not as foreign or irrelevant.

This section will therefore proceed by taking each of these principles in turn, examining how Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer develop and emphasize them within their respective works. In this way, my aim is not to merely summarize their contributions but to synthesize them into a set of transferable insights for established churches seeking to reach those outside of the Christian faith. In doing so, this thesis posits that church planting is more than a missional strategy. It is also a living laboratory for how the churches and leaders can engage contemporary cultures with the Christian gospel.

2.1. Evangelistic Impulse

Evangelism, as defined historically in the Christian tradition, has seen different overlapping arcs throughout history: the catechetical teaching in the Middle Ages, the preaching of the word in the Reformation, the conversion-centered evangelism of the Puritans, the revivalistic approach of the Great Awakening, the cross-cultural emphasis of the modern missions movement, the seeker friendly methods of the late 20th century, and the relational evangelism into the present. The overall thrust of the work of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer, displays elements from each of these historical eras are present. In other words, they think of evangelism comprehensively. While they do offer critique (especially Hirsch) they are not primarily concerned with debate about this or that evangelistic style, but whether evangelism is occurring at all. Evangelism "is when people are challenged directly with the gospel and invited to respond."[58] Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer are interested in the intentional implementation and actual efficacy of evangelistic strategies. As it relates to established churches and church plants alike, if protestant

[58] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 242.

churches in America — and in the Western world more broadly — are to stem the decline in Christian belief and churchgoing, more "conversion growth" (rather than "transfer growth") is necessary. Drawing in unchurched and non-Christian people requires evangelistic impulse.

The subject of evangelism pervades the field of church planting, so it is unsurprising that the writings of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer are concerned with it. A motivator for each is the Great Commission mandate to make new disciples, and church planting serves as a vehicle for doing so.[59] While there are variations in the articulation and execution of this evangelistic impulse, the motivation to reach non-Christian people is fundamental to their respective church and church planting initiatives. Church planting, on a basic level, exists to reach new people and new populations with the good news about Jesus. This section will explore how the evangelistic impulse has been key to church planting's efficacy in drawing in unchurched people compared to established churches. It will provide an overview of the views from Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer: outlining their main ideas and summarizing principal similarities and differences between the three. Because the purpose of this study is to distill the core principles that have made church planting effective in reaching unchurched people, the similarities between them will be foregrounded. Finally, this section will conclude with common objections to evangelism and how these thought leaders have responded. This exploration of Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's views on evangelism will provide important part of the schema for the analysis in Part 3 of this thesis.

2.1.1. Hirsch: Incarnational Evangelism

Of the three thought leaders whose church planting contributions are explored by this study, Hirsch offers the most direct criticism of recent movements in American church evangelism — namely what he calls "attractional" models. He shows how the attraction model

[59] E.g. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 76. Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 41. Keller, *Center Church*, 230.

assumes that non-Christians will come to a church building or service on their own. Hirsch identifies two major problems with attractional evangelism. First, the assumption itself is not proven out in the data. On their own, non-Christian and unchurched people do not, in fact, turn out in meaningful numbers for church services. If they do, it is almost always the result of an invitation from a trusted friend, not the result of a sufficiently "attractive" church event. Soberingly, Hirsch states that "we have the unfortunate situation of around 90 percent of healthy contemporary churches [are] competing with one another to reach 40 percent of the population."[60] Second, attractional evangelism only perpetuates what Hirsch calls the "safe, middle-class, consumerist captivity of the church."[61] If the job of churches is to assemble services with production values that rival dozens of other events the same weekend, then by definition, evangelism strategies have become fatally commercialized. Hirsch entreats church leaders and church planting leaders to shift their focus from the 30-40 percent who are most likely to consider attending a church service, to the 60-70 percent who have not considered "church" at all. Instead of relying on attraction, Hirsch advocates for a person-to-person incarnational approach to evangelism. In fact, a much of his writing and work centers around this "missional" approach to church formation.[62] Hirsch strongly argues that a missional approach to evangelism is crucial for removing unnecessary obstacles that prevent people from arriving at Christian understanding and belief.

Hirsch proposes deep cultural immersion as essential for church planting evangelism, citing the ways that modern people in cities are divided into "tribes" or many different

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[60] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 72.

[61] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 241.

[62] E.g. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 202–33.

subgroups.[63] To genuinely connect with them, one needs to enter into their subgroups. To drive his point, Hirsch draws contrasts between missional-incarnational model and what he perceives to be the *status quo.* Rather than attracting people, go to people. Rather than importing models from outside communities, churches should be planted within communities. Rather than existing outside of the context, churches should position themselves inside the local context. "Only in this way can the church actually become part of the cultural fabric and social rhythms of the host community."[64]

With the missional-incarnational approach, Hirsch challenges Christians and Christian leaders to invert many of their operating assumptions about evangelism. It is less about attracting and more about going. It is less about making church practice palatable and more about church people reaching out into communities where people are. This is not without potential pitfalls. Where Stetzer's model might be criticized for its over-systematization and goal-orientation, Hirsch's could be criticized from the opposite direction. After all, incarnational church planters living among non-Christians and integrating the gospel into everyday life strains many conventional approaches to goal-making and measurement-taking altogether. Further critiques of the missional-incarnational approach have questioned the potentially blurred lines between gospel proclamation and cultural adaptation. However, Hirsch remains unflinching: seeker churches should be out seeking, not waiting for so-called "seekers." This missional-incarnational evangelism is reflected in Jesus's Parable of the Lost Sheep. The "seeker" is not the one who is lost; the seeker is the shepherd, proactively out searching.[65]

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[63] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 230.

[64] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 232.

[65] Luke 15:1-7

2.1.2. Keller – Gospel Contextualization in Evangelism

Keller's discussion of evangelism draws out two themes in particular: evangelism as a process, and communication that is understandable in a secular culture. The first point aligns with Stetzer's recognition that evangelism takes time.[66] Keller expands on this idea, describing how "many people process from unbelief to faith through 'mini-decisions.'"[67] Keller is theological in his approach, being careful to affirm the historical understanding of conversion: "You either are a Christian or you are not — you either are united to him by faith or you are not — because being a Christian is, first of all, a 'standing' with God."[68] Keller holds this in tension with the process nature of evangelism and conversion.

Keller identifies six common "mini-decisions" that people make in their process to Christian faith: awareness, relevance, credibility, trial, commitment, and reinforcement.[69] Awareness happens when their (sometimes subconscious) presuppositions about Christians or the Bible are eroded, usually by relating to an authentic Christian for the first time or reading the Bible for the first time. In this way, this step in evangelism is often relational. Relevance means that a person moves from indifference or perhaps from recognizing that Christian belief might be beneficial for some people, to first acknowledgement that it seems like it could be beneficial *for me.* Credibility happens when a person begins to see Christian belief as reasonable. This contrasts with their previously held understanding that Christianity is chosen despite its irrationality. Trial means a person begins to "try on" some more aspects Christian life they observe in Christians they know. Often this begins with participation in a small group or Bible study. Commitment is

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[66] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 244.

[67] Keller, *Center Church*, 281.

[68] Keller, *Center Church*, 281.

[69] Keller, *Center Church*, 281–82.

the moment when a person realizes that they believe fundamentals about Christianity, e.g. "I am a sinner, and I need a Savior." Keller is quick to point out that this might be the point of conversion, or it might be simply the time when someone *notices what they came to believe some time ago.* Notably, Keller's evangelism formulation does not conclude here with conversion, but continues with *reinforcement* which he describes as "the place where the penny drops and the gospel becomes even clearer and more real."[70] For Keller, each of these mini-decisions are a result of God's gracious working and a carefully contextualized gospel — one that is at once understandable, reasonable, and relevant.

Keller's discussion of evangelism shares important overlap with Stetzer and with Hirsch. Like Hirsch, Keller also uses "missional" to describe the nature of a church's evangelistic focus.[71] He also advocates for equipping lay leaders to live intentionally as Christians in their neighborhoods and workplaces.[72] Like Stetzer, Keller is unequivocal in his conviction that evangelism is central to a local church's mission. He too cites the Great Commission's mandate to make disciples.[73] He differs in his expanded concern for cultural resonance, namely as expressed in how churches and church leaders first know their surrounding cultural context and second speak into that context in understandable ways. This will be expounded upon in the "Contextual Resonance" section below.

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[70] Keller, *Center Church*, 282.

[71] Keller, *Center Church*, 172.

[72] Keller, *Center Church*, 258.

[73] Keller, *Center Church*, 231.

2.1.3. Stetzer: Intentional and Structured Evangelism

Stetzer is explicit in his advocacy for evangelism as a centerpiece for church planting: "…biblical church planting *is evangelism* that results in new churches."[74] He offers three points for church planters to initiate an evangelistic strategy: intentionality, systematization, and mobilization. First, being intentional means that the church plant is explicit in having an evangelistic strategy. Second, being systematic means there is a method for follow-up on every person who has encountered the church. As a part of this system, Stetzer utilizes the Engel Scale and the Gray Matrix as tools to help identify where individuals are in their faith journey.[75] Third, mobilizing means that the church planting leader is proactive in equipping the church planting team. Staff, volunteers, and congregants are given practical models to help them share with neighbors and friends about how the Christian faith has impacted their own lives.[76] With this kind of evangelistic strategy, new churches aim for conversion growth rather than "just rearranging church members."[77] This structured evangelistic impulse ensures that the substance of the church plant remains on reaching non-Christians, not just attracting believers from other churches. The strength of Stetzer's systematic approach is that it prioritizes measurable goals and outcomes. However, it is possible that an over-reliance on strategy could short-circuit organic relationships. Hirsch, in particular, highlights the importance of an organic, incarnational, and "missional" approach to evangelism. Keller is not opposed to a systematic approach, but his emphasis is on making the evangelistic message understandable to the uninitiated. Stetzer himself recognizes that an overly systems-oriented approach can be potential hazard to fruitful evangelism. He argues

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[74] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 241. Emphasis mine. Here Stetzer is quoting J.D. Payne, but he repeats and builds upon the concept at various points in the book.

[75] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 245–47.

[76] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 244.

[77] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 243.

against reducing people to projects, being careful to not engage people in a way that they could interpret a church plant as seeing them as mere cogs in an evangelism machine.[78]

Stetzer employs the metaphor "the soil of lostness" to call attention to the necessity of persistent outreach to the people who are not yet part of any local church congregation.[79] A new church should consider itself "planted" primarily in "the soil of lostness." This means it has positioned itself for those people and places which have not yet sufficiently encountered the Christian community and message in ways that elicit a deliberate response. Planting in "the soil of lostness" requires ongoing engagement with people rather than short-term evangelistic efforts. Both Hirsch and Keller also identify the criticality of *time* for effective evangelism. People need time, and conversion most often happens over a series of events and conversations. Stetzer's "soil of lostness" metaphor requires perseverance, and it largely aligns with Hirsch's missional approach. While not in disagreement, Keller emphasizes the importance of cultural understanding and attunement as a critical part of the evangelistic process.

2.1.4. Responding to Common Objections to Evangelism

Over the past two to three decades, some important objections to and concerns with evangelism, or approaches to evangelism, have been raised.[80] Five such objections are: 1) Evangelism is outdated in a pluralistic society,[81] 2) Evangelism is manipulative of the recipient

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[78] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 252.

[79] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 243.

[80] The examples I have provided here are limited to the last 15 years and to thinkers that have influenced the same protestant church circles where Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer also have influence.

[81] See, for example, arguments about Christendom evangelism being inadequate in an era when people find it difficult to accept exclusive truth claims in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE99119548424708501.

or audience,[82] 3) Evangelism is exclusive and intolerant,[83] 4) Evangelism focuses on conversion rather than discipleship,[84] and 5) Evangelism detracts from focus on issues of justice.[85] The full discussion surrounding each of these objections far exceeds the scope of this study. This section will provide a summary of how Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer respond either directly or indirectly to these concerns. Also, even though Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer are strongly pro-evangelistic in their approach to church planting, they each also find agreement with some aspects of these critiques.

First, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer each address the charge that evangelism is outdated in a pluralistic society in different ways. As discussed above, Hirsch largely agrees with this criticism insofar as it relates to attractional evangelism. Only with incarnational presence will evangelism be effective today.[86] Keller finds that pluralism does not outmode evangelism; rather it necessitates methodological adjustments while keeping the message the same. In fact, the idea of communicating evangelistically within pluralistic culture is central to Keller's thought.[87] Stetzer, adds that while "many Christians think evangelism is passé," the best church plants simply

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[82] See, for example, arguments about evangelistic techniques based on coercion or fear tactics rather than genuine persuasion from Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE99119548751308501.

[83] While this is not a view that is widely espoused by leaders within the same Protestant church sphere of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer, it is often a presupposition of people in Western contexts in which they minister.

[84] For example, while not eschewing evangelism altogether, Dallas Willard's case against easy conversionism that is not properly anchored in long-term discipleship to Jesus. See Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE005955360. and

[85] See, for example, advocating against an evangelism that is only "good at talking about life after death" from Shane Claiborne, "What If Jesus Meant the Stuff He Said?," Speech, First Baptist Church, Kansas City, September 19, 2019, https://wordandway.org/2019/10/22/justice-needs-proximity-claiborne-preaches/.

[86] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 218.

[87] Keller, *Center Church*, 252.

acknowledge that "there is good news to tell."[88] This will necessarily be reflected in how they execute their ministries.

Second, Keller and Stetzer acknowledge the objection to evangelism as manipulative and respond similarly. Keller emphasizes that Christian witness is not "an effort to secure political power in order to impose Christian standards and beliefs on an unwilling populace.[89]" Stetzer agrees: "Evangelism is not recruitment. Evangelism is not even outreach… It is when people are challenged directly with the gospel and invited to respond."[90] For his part, Hirsch's incarnational approach necessitates relational rather than manipulative methodology. Lamenting what he sees as the consumerist bent of too many churches in the West, Hirsch says "what you win them *with*, you win them *to*."[91] Rather than with clever marketing campaigns, true evangelism persuades with real relationship and discipleship to Jesus. For all three church planting voices, invitation rather than imposition, genuine concern, and non-transactional relationships, are central to authentic Christian evangelism.

Third, Keller and Stetzer again respond directly to the charge of evangelism being intolerant. Inherent to this objection is a tension. On the one hand, there is the universality of the Christian message: all people everywhere share a longing and need for something more. On the other hand, there is the exclusivity of the Christian message: only in Jesus Christ can people encounter what they most long for and need. Keller acknowledges the tension and upholds the view that instead of being disregarded out of hand as intolerant but instead assessed on its the merits of its claims. Christianity's essential conviction is not an exclusive "means of moral

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[88] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 241.

[89] Keller, *How to Reach the West Again*, 13.

[90] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 242.

[91] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 77.

improvement" but instead a "profoundly humbling" belief that "salvation by grace, salvation not because of what we do but because of what Christ has done for us."[92] Stetzer also acknowledges the exclusivity of the Christian faith (or any other faith for that matter). He argues that the broad cultural perception of Christianity as judgmental is a "corruption" of Jesus's teaching on judgment.[93] In this way, better evangelism is an answer to the charge of intolerance, not a cause of it.

Fourth, Hirsch and Stetzer most directly address the objection that evangelism focuses on conversion rather than discipleship. Hirsch sees the issue holistically. Discipleship and evangelism are two sides of the same coin. True evangelism leads to whole life transformation, which in turn leads to more incarnational evangelism, and so on. Evangelism is framed within discipleship.[94] Stetzer is pithy: "Discipleship is the task of the New Testament church," and he links this directly with the Great Commission.[95] For all three thought leaders, this objection produces a false dichotomy. After all, disciples evangelize, and evangelism produces disciples.

Fifth, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer all respond directly to the charge that the church should expend its energy and focus on justice issues instead. Hirsch, again, takes an incarnational approach. His concern for justice is seen in his call for incarnational mission in all communities and subgroups, at the "center" and on the margins.[96] Keller addresses this issue at some length, arguing carefully that doing justice and evangelism are both critical for a church. He sees errors

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[92] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 57.

[93] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 21; Also, Stetzer cites Keller on this subject in *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 26.

[94] Alan Hirsch, *Why Evangelism Cannot Be Our Focus*, June 3, 2013, https://vergenetwork.org/why-evangelism-cannot-be-our-focus-alan-hirsch/; See also Hirsch's longer treatment on this subject in *Disciplism: Reimagining Evangelism Through the Lens of Discipleship* (100 Movements Publishing, 2024).

[95] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 41.

[96] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 60–63.

in two directions: neglecting justice issues altogether in pursuit of gospel proclamation, and conflating doing justice with gospel proclamation. “But just as faith and works must not be separated or confused, so the results of the gospel must never be separated from or confused with the gospel itself."[97] Stetzer writes, “To focus on one [evangelism] and negate the other [justice] is to participate in a partial mission.”[98] In this way, systemic and social injustices are not met by throwing out evangelism, but by engaging it more thoroughly. Changed systems and transformed societies are products of, not distractions from, effective evangelism.

While critics raise valid concerns about its methods, exclusivity, and emphasis on conversion, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer argue that Christian evangelism remains essential. They contend that it must be conducted with cultural astuteness, doctrinal integrity, and concern for the whole person and society. In fact, true evangelism does not leave individuals, systems, or societies unchanged. This kind of transformation is only possible through authentic persuasion. Neither manipulative coercion nor short-term “decision counting” have the lasting power to make new disciples of Jesus.

2.1.5. Areas of Convergence: The Necessity of Evangelistic Impulse

All three thought leaders affirm evangelistic impulse as crucial to church planting. There are some differences. Hirsch’s movemental approach implicitly critiques Stetzer’s more strategic or Keller’s more institutional approaches. Likewise, Keller positions his own framework as a corrective both to over-movemental impulse (which can undervalue institutional stability) and to church-planting pragmatism (which can over-functionalize evangelism.) However, despite these

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[97] Keller, *Center Church*, 30; See also Keller’s book length treatment of Christian engagement with justice: *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just*, with Internet Archive (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), http://archive.org/details/generousjusticeh0000kell_a4r0.

[98] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 33.

nuances, all three find fundamental agreement with evangelism as crucial to a church's expression and strategy. All three recognize incarnational approaches as necessary in secular and secularizing environments. All three emphasize the importance contextual engagement. All three cite Jesus's Great Commission as a motivating principle for evangelistic impulse. All three acknowledge concerns with and objections to those evangelistic enterprises which fail to result in personal transformation or social good. Finally, all three express an unrelenting focus on those people who are not yet a part of any local church, many of whom have likely never related with a believing Christian or encountered a compelling presentation of the Christian gospel. While there is some variation in their methods, each agrees that new churches must intentionally and persistently reach out to non-Christian and unchurched people. Strategies will (and should) diverge from one context to another, but an evangelistic impulse will always be a part of a church plant that is effective in drawing new people into the Christian faith and community.

In conclusion, evangelistic impulse is indispensable to church planting. While each perspective is unique, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer's viewpoints are complementary. Stetzer's contribution is primarily strategic; Hirsch's is primarily incarnational; Keller's is primarily contextual. However, each appreciates all these areas of evangelism: strategic, incarnational, and contextual. In other words, while there is variation in emphasis, all three leaders advocate for new churches to practice evangelism as a core component of their missions.

2.2. Entrepreneurial Innovation

Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer agree on the importance of evangelistic impulse, they also recognize that methods of evangelism will need to be tailored to a post-Christian, post-

churchgoing society.[99] Methods of evangelism and other church activity that were effective in previous generations require fresh entrepreneurial innovation. Traditional church models have often relied on broad cultural norms like people identifying with a church or denomination, or a generally positive perception of Sunday church attendance. Because this kind of cultural consensus no longer prevails, churches cannot rely only on opening their doors for weekly services. As surveyed in part one of this study, data that support these cultural shifts have been persistent for decades.

With this sociocultural milieu in view, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer each express urgency for innovation in how local churches connect to and express themselves within the culture at large. While they affirm entrepreneurial innovation, they differ in their theological framing and practical applications. Their distinct emphases — movemental (Hirsch), theological (Keller), and strategic (Stetzer) — offer dialogue for not only for prospective church planters, but for leaders of established churches as well. This section explores these three thought leaders' views about innovation, compares their contributions, and offers practical synthesis.

2.2.1. Stetzer: Innovation as Evangelistic Strategy

Stetzer remains focused on the importance and power of evangelism for new churches to gain traction, to thrive, and most importantly, to make a meaningful difference in people's lives. For Stetzer, ecclesial innovation is about adjusting evangelistic methods for new realities. He identifies two main areas of innovation: missional methodologies and entrepreneurial leadership. This chapter discusses each of these in turn, and it will show how Stetzer strongly correlates each to a church plant's evangelistic purpose.

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[99] For example, Keller discusses the radical change in the "cultural furniture" from the mid-twentieth century compared with the early 21st century. Christian leaders can no longer rely on broad, agreed upon understandings about the Bible or even about morality. See *Center Church*, 182.

First, successful church plants are "missional" in their outreach, while remaining steadfast in the fundamentals of the Christian message. Stetzer identifies missional outreach as an important ecclesial innovation for the contemporary era. Stetzer illustrates with his own personal story of being introduced to the Bible and the story of Jesus when he was a teenager on Long Island. "I already had some beliefs that led me to respond by the prompting of the Holy Spirit by grace and through faith. But now we're living in a world where for many people they're multiple steps away or farther from those truths."[100] For Stetzer, decades ago, even without growing up in a Christian home, he still possessed some basic knowledge founded on a Christian (or at least Christianized) perspective. Today, this kind of culturally inherited Christian knowledge can no longer be taken for granted.

Citing the tribe of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12, Stetzer advocates churches and Christian leaders "knowing the time" in order to respond appropriately to present opportunities and challenges. "We need new churches that are fresh expressions of the unchanging gospel."[101] Stetzer's approach to innovation in the church involves being "missional" in the community within which the church is located. He defines missional as "living and acting like a missionary without ever leaving your city."[102] Being missional requires an understanding of God's mission in the world to reconcile people to himself. But it also involves speaking and doing in ways that resonate with the broader community. Stetzer offers examples of people living missionally: a person starting a simple Bible study in their home for those who are unchurched, people in the marketplace being alert and responsive to natural ways to talk about their faith in Jesus, a church

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[100] *Leading the Church of Tomorrow*, directed by Ed Stetzer, Amplify Conference (Wheaton IL: Wheaton College Billy Graham Center, 2023), 34:07, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFR1RaO0-Ds.

[101] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 32.

[102] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31.

that participates in community events rather than only planning their own events, and implementing with services and spaces that benefit the whole community.[103]

A second way that Stetzer identifies innovation as a core component of effective church planting is in a church's leadership. Fruitful church plants have leaders who are comfortable with trying new things, citing the apostle Paul as an example of this kind of temperament.[104] He identifies several different effective church planter leadership models: apostolic harvest planter, entrepreneurial/founding planter, and team planter.[105] In each of these models, however, the value for experimentation with new expressions and methods remains. Inherent to trying new things is a certain amount of risk. After all, "planting new churches is always risky."[106] However, leaders who are most innovative also tend to be comfortable with the risk of new and different approaches. While some approaches might fail, others will provide breakthroughs into the culture and community, opening doors for new people to discover the Christian gospel. In fact, the first trait for church planting leaders that Stetzer identifies is that of "pattern of ministry initiation."[107] By this he means that the kind of person who will be successful in church planting is someone whose life has already demonstrates a serial entrepreneurship; they start new things. As with a church plant's missional outreach, Stetzer is careful to stipulate that innovation should never be for innovation's sake, but for the sake of a church's core evangelistic mission.

In these examples of ecclesial innovation, Stetzer takes care to separate the methods from the core doctrinal Christian convictions. The creativity necessary for entrepreneurial innovation

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[103] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31–32.

[104] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 48.

[105] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 79–89.

[106] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 37.

[107] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 57.

— be it from missional outreach or an entrepreneurial leader — must never mean changing the Christian message. In fact, Stetzer argues, it is possible for church plants to do community outreach without ever announcing the good news about Jesus.[108] Just like a church merely opening its doors for service on Sunday is not truly *missional*, so too would a church plant which merely offers community events without ever pointing to the person and power of Jesus. Fruitful innovation in a church's methods, therefore, will never mean compromising or altering the fundamental message about Jesus's reconciliation of people to himself. In this way, entrepreneurial innovation is closely related to proper contextualization, which Stetzer contends is critical for effective missional outreach of a church plant. (Contextualization will be discussed at greater length in a later chapter.) What this means here is that innovation is not about the message, but about the method. "[T]he gospel remains the same, but methods change."[109]

In summary, Stetzer's perspective on innovation might be referred to as "evangelistic entrepreneurship." His emphasis on evangelism — that is reaching those people who have yet to hear, understand, and believe — remains unwavering even as he discusses innovation like missionality and entrepreneurship. "In church planting the goal isn't to plant the coolest church or do things that have never been done before, but it's always to reach people, be on mission, and be about the kingdom of God."[110] This separation of the message from the method empowers church planters to rethink outreach tools without undermining the fidelity of the Christian message. For Stetzer, for churches to continue to have any meaningful impact on society and with individuals' lives, they must change, adapt, and experiment with new methodologies. At the same time, for

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[108] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 242.

[109] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 242.

[110] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 10.

churches to have any meaningful impact on society and with individuals, the fundamental message about who Jesus is and what he has done must remain unchanged.

2.2.2. Hirsch: Innovation for Mission

Of the three primary interlocutors in this thesis, Hirsch most frequently and fervently identifies innovation as vital for churches and church plants to be effective in the present era. As ever, he has mission top of mind: "If we take mission out of the equation, it strikes a serious blow to our capacity to *innovate*—something we desperately need to break out of the worn-out forms of the Christendom church."[111] In other words, innovation is not the goal, but that clear mission feeds creativity and risk taking for the good of said mission. Too often, Hirsch contends, churches and church culture have abandoned this kind of innovation in favor of the status quo or comfort. Here his concept of a church's "missional DNA" (or "mDNA") comes into focus. Like biological DNA, Hirsch asserts that missional DNA is already at the heart of the church as Jesus designed and intended it. This is expressed through apostolic leaders, through Christians going out into the world, and Christians creating meaningful community. Perhaps this mDNA is latent or dormant, but it is at the created center of a church. "Innovation" therefore, often means recovering what is ancient, what is original, or what has been lost as generations of churches constructed systems for security rather than for mission. Three main areas come into focus in Hirsch's writing relating to entrepreneurship and innovation: the "missional-incarnational impulse," the risk inherent to "liminality and *communitas*," and the need for more apostolic leadership. The idea of ecclesial innovation permeates Hirsch's writing, and these three areas in particular illuminate his thinking and his proposals on the subject.

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[111] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 231.

First, one of six critical components of Hirsch's mDNA is the "missional incarnational impulse" which combines the action of the *missio Dei* and the embodiment of the Christian gospel.[112] This is critical because churches and leaders are first joining in God's mission not their own. First, the missional aspect his could be best summed up as the *Go* action in Jesus's Great Commission.[113] Hirsch first considers the *missio Dei* — God's going out into the world in Christ Jesus on behalf of people. God is active; he has moved toward people. The very mission of God is to draw in unchurched and non-Christian people. Likewise, churches, church plants, and individual Christians share in this great mission as they are sent out into the world. There is an active, restless element to this first element of the missional incarnational impulse. Those captured by it cannot sit still or sit idly by; they must go out into the community on mission. Second, like the missional aspect, the incarnational aspect is also first witnessed in the work of Jesus. Not only did he *go,* but he did also so in the flesh. He drew close to people; he built community among his followers. He preached the good news, but more critically he embodied the good news. Hirsch says that this order is important: Christology drives missiology which drives ecclesiology.[114] Like Jesus, the missional incarnational impulse drives churches, church plants, and individual Christians to immerse themselves in the context. This requires humility and proximity to people who are different than they are. It is through incarnational living that new communities are forged in Jesus's name. As part of the mDNA of Jesus's church, the missional incarnational impulse is a natural rhythm and life. However, it has become unnatural to many entrenched church systems. For Hirsch, innovation begins with incarnation. Innovation, creativity, and risk are necessary to break out of calcified structures and to recover this impulse.

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[112] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 202–33.

[113] Matthew 28:18-20

[114] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 230.

Furthermore, the very nature of the missional incarnational impulse is innovative, tailoring itself to specific places, times, groups, and subgroups.[115]

Second, and closely tied to the missional incarnational impulse, is Hirsch's idea of liminality and *communitas.*[116] First, liminality is the marginal state where risk, disorientation, and challenge are encountered. Hirsch contrasts liminality with what he refers to as a middle-class obsession with security and comfort. This obsession has resulted in churches that practice almost exclusively within their own walls and only during certain hours. Liminality as necessary for churches to participate in their true mission. Like the missional incarnational impulse, Hirsch views liminality as both necessary and neglected by too many Western churches. He ties the idea to liminality to mission because it is in life on mission where this liminal state is found. Living missionally provides the environment for liminality. Hirsch cites biblical examples like time in the wilderness or experiencing persecution as formative for the first Christians and churches. Liminality is also needed today to compel churches, church plants, and individual Christians to adapt, to grow, to develop resilience, and *to experiment.*[117] Second, Hirsch uses the Latin *communitas* to signal a richer kind of community. *Communitas* is forged in liminality. It is characterized by strong camaraderie that can only be built through shared experience of both hardship and success. Finally, unlike "community" which Hirsch describes as inward-focused, static, and self-protecting, *communitas* is outward-looking, dynamic, and risk taking. The nature of *communitas* is missional, entrepreneurial, and adaptive.[118]

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[115] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 231.

[116] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 234–71.

[117] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 82.

[118] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 252.

Third, Hirsch identifies apostolic leaders as innovators and pioneers. "[T]he apostolic task is about the expansion of Christianity both physically in the form of *pioneering* missionary effort and church planting and theologically through integration of apostolic doctrine into the life of individual Christians and the communities they are a part of."[119] Central to much of Hirsch's work is the APEST (Apostolic, Prophetic, Evangelistic, Shepherding, Teaching) leadership framework.[120] Within this framework, *apostolic leaders* both help to prevent ecclesial stasis and to drive move a church's mission forward. Hirsch is focused on movement and mission over institution, and he asserts that while all the APEST leadership functions are needed to bring about a movement, the apostolic function is the most overlooked in the Western churches.[121] In fact, the most emphasized of the APEST functions (Shepherd and Teacher) tend to be the two that are least likely to tackle new territory, new ideas, and new methodologies. In contrast, "the apostolic person's calling is fundamentally about the extension of Christianity, often onto new, uncharted ground."[122] Hirsch's emphasis on the pioneering spirit of apostolic leadership may well be why he is a frequent guest at church planting gatherings and conferences. Apostolic leaders draw their authority not from structure or institution, but from inspiration. They stir up new initiatives, push new boundaries, inspire people into new works. Crucially, this trailblazing disposition naturally results in keep the *mission* front and center, guarding against institutional inertia. In this way, apostolic leadership is the driving force behind missional movements, enabling them to flourish by integrating mDNA into normalized praxis.[123]

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[119] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 194. Italics mine.

[120] "What Is APEST?"

[121] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 89.

[122] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 190.

[123] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 191–203.

In conclusion, entrepreneurial innovation is central to the missional incarnational impulse, liminality and *communitas,* and the apostolic leadership that Hirsch describes. Innovation, adaptation, and risk are all inherent to churches, church plants, and individual Christians who are actively participating in the mission of Jesus to reconcile the world to himself. When a church embarks on a new journey or takes on a new initiative there is risk, and within that liminal space is precisely where the Holy Spirit often works — shaping the people who are already part of the Christian community and drawing in new people into the Christian community. In this way, innovation is not merely an ecclesial strategy, but it is intrinsic to the nature of church movements.[124]

2.2.3. Keller: Innovation as Theological Vision in Action

While Keller recognizes innovation and entrepreneurship as central to the start-up nature of church planting, he insists that it must flow out of an understanding and application of the Christian gospel, not primarily from new fads or pragmatic ends. For this, Keller ties church planting's innovative character to "theological vision" as the "middleware" between doctrine and expression. As a matter of fact, this is where Keller got the name for his church planting opus, *Center Church*.[125] Keller says that it is the gospel center that provides balance and freedom for how ministry is expressed in a particular time and place. A clear theological vision will be transferable and adaptable, able to be implemented in different ways by different entrepreneurial leaders. Without clear theological vision, innovation will not be sufficiently grounded and will result in little more than change for change's sake. Keller, in his typical fashion, identifies a tension: there are churches that are unchangingly tied to their own historical and institutional

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[124] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 161.

[125] Keller, *Center Church*, 19–22.

traditions, and there are churches that are proudly untethered to any tradition and that change readily and rapidly. Keller argues that both extremes — excessive traditionalism and unconstrained innovation — "stifle the development of leadership and strangle the health of the church as a corporate body, as a community. To the degree that it [a church] commits either of these errors, it loses its life-giving power."[126] The kind of innovation that *is* life-giving, in contrast, is one that flows from a clear theological vision.

Keller defines theological vision as "a vision for what you are going to do with your doctrine in a particular time and place."[127] Keller cites Richard Lints who identifies components of theological vision: listening to the Bible, reflection on culture, the context's understanding of reason, and theological tradition, and he expands these into a number of questions to help develop theological vision.[128] To form clear theological vision, Keller proposes leaders carefully consider questions about doctrine, about the culture, and about their church tradition. Doctrine provides the foundation of a church's belief, ministry programs express a church's activity, and theological vision bridges the two by seeing and understanding the Bible, the culture at large, and the gifts, resources, and traditions of a particular church. In this way, for Keller theological vision is indispensable for moving from doctrinal foundation to ministry programs. Without it, "innovation" will be untethered from the church's mission and potentially ineffective with non-Christian and unchurched people in the broader culture. Without crystalized vision for a particular time and place, a church will either find its sound doctrine stuck without culturally meaningful or resonant expression, or it might find itself loaded with initiatives that have little or no grounding in a substantial "why" (the gospel) or "who" (Jesus Christ). Furthermore, even a church with

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[126] Keller, *Center Church*, 24.

[127] Keller, *Center Church*, 19.

[128] Keller, *Center Church*, 18–19.

strong doctrinal convictions, but without coherent theological vision, will inevitably be less effective at reaching outside its own community simply because it has not adequately considered the time and place in which it finds itself. In contrast, explicit theological vision inescapably results in innovation to bridge the gap between doctrine and the people "out there." Finally, as a student and practitioner of the city, Keller notes how theological vision offers clarity and direction in complex, globalized and urban environments.[129]

Keller argues theological vision provides the context for productive creativity in a church because it is neither bound by superfluous ecclesial traditions nor disconnected from necessary doctrinal foundations. However, it does more than offer an important bulwark against extremes. Keller argues that theological vision pours the foundation for fresh creativity to build upon. As he and the other leaders at Redeemer Presbyterian were crafting the "City to City" church planting initiative Keller observed, "We believed a city needed all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. And we knew that church planters need to create ministry, not replicate it."[130] In other words, out of theological vision flows new creative ideas to reach new non-Christian and unchurched people. This "missional community" that Keller defines is very similar to Hirsch and Stetzer: it is characterized by authentic reach into and connection with everyday life: individuals, families, education, and the marketplace. In fact, akin to Hirsch, the church where Keller served in New York City used the term "DNA" before Keller adopting the term "theological vision" in *Center Church*.[131] Those who are part of a local church are actively connected with and drawing in those who are not (yet) part of a local church. Keller doesn't stop there. Keller continues with what he calls "movement dynamics." When a critical mass of individual Christians, church

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[129] Keller, *Center Church*, 17–21.

[130] Keller, *Center Church*, 20.

[131] Keller, *Center Church*, 22.

leaders, and local churches in an area are engaged in missional community that is built upon theological vision, this creates the dynamics to spark "movement." Movement primarily deals with a local church's relationship with entities beyond itself. Movement happens when a critical mass are churches are jointly pursuing — faithfully to their respective church's beliefs — the common good of the neighborhood, city, or region.

Keller recognizes the important role of innovation in church planting: reaching different people and neighbors are going to require fresh approaches. However, he balances this entrepreneurial character with the importance of sound theological vision. Keller argues that as new churches reach new populations previously disconnected from a local church, they will only be effective long-term with a balance of movement and institution, creativity and tradition.

2.2.4. Areas of Convergence: The Necessity of Entrepreneurial Innovation

There is much overlap in their conclusions about innovation in church planting. First, all three thought leaders recognize the importance of new approaches to reach non-Christians and the unchurched. This has always been true but is more acutely felt now as post-Christian cultural shifts accelerate. Entrepreneurial innovation expressed in new initiatives from church leaders and laypeople more readily reaches people who might have not otherwise been reached. Second, Hirsch, Stetzer, and Keller demonstrate broad agreement that innovation that serves evangelistic mission rather than for novelty or for its own sake. Third, each thought leader emphasizes maintaining doctrinal fidelity while adapting new methods. Keller takes this point further by arguing that sound theology makes space for true innovation. Fourth, all three display a strong outward orientation in their discussion of innovation. Creative approaches are outward facing, redirecting church energy and resources from internal maintenance to external engagement. Finally, all three thought leaders highlight the critical role of entrepreneurial leadership in

catalyzing innovation. Entrepreneurial leaders have a sound (and growing) ecclesial *and* cultural knowledge as well as seek to creatively bridge these two spheres.

Of course, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer also offer distinctive contributions to the role of entrepreneurial innovation in church planting. Hirsch's missional DNA positions "innovation" as recovering what is not new: the ancient apostolic patterns of missional-incarnational impulse which are forged in liminality. Keller grounds innovation at the intersection of doctrinal foundation, cultural understanding, and ecclesial institution by advocating for a clear theological vision as first and most important step in any entrepreneurial church planting endeavor. Stetzer's evangelistic entrepreneurship focuses innovation primarily on evangelistic efficacy, separating the unchanging message of the Christian gospel from adaptable and, in some ways, ever-changing methods.

Bringing these distinctive and overlapping ideas together, would mean an innovation that is theologically grounded, culturally informed, missionally driven, risk embracing, intentionally balanced between tradition and adaptation, and outwardly engaged. Taken together, this helps to outline an integrated approach for entrepreneurial church innovation.

2.3. Contextual Resonance

Contextualization represents a critical dimension of effective church planting, especially when engaging non-Christian and unchurched people. All three thought leaders — Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer — emphasize contextualization but approach it differently based on their individual theological backgrounds and ministry experiences. Understanding the similarities and variations in these contextualization approaches provides church planters with clear bearings while navigating diverse and changing cultural surroundings. This chapter will explore how each thought leader defines, applies, and evaluates contextualization in church planting, especially with an aim toward as-yet unchurched populations. It will move from Hirsch's incarnational

value to Keller's theological emphasis to Stetzer's grounded pragmatism. These complementary perspectives offer church plants and established churches alike practical pathways for meaningful and effective engagement with the broader culture wherein a church finds itself.

2.3.1. Hirsch: Missional-Incarnational Contextualization

Alan Hirsch views contextualization through a lens of mission and incarnation: "Mission in the incarnational mode is highly sensitive to the cultural forms and rhythms of a people group, because these are the means of meaningful relationship and influence. Incarnational mission thus engages people from within their cultural expression…. This is the only way to ensure that the Christian community truly incarnates itself and is fully contextualized."[132] His approach emphasizes this incarnational presence in all areas of society, but especially with people in subcultures at the margins. Here again arises his "twin impulses" — the missional and the incarnational. The missional impulse drives a church or church plant outward into the culture and context. The incarnational impulse drives a church or church plant to embed the gospel deeply within the culture and context.

Hirsch's missional-incarnational approach to contextualization prioritizes both cultural penetration and interpersonal embodiment, rather than superficially trying on new styles or merely creating new programs. Here Hirsch's contrasts his emphasis on incarnational presence with the attractional church growth models that were born in the 1980s and gained traction in the 1990s. For example, in his ministry in Melbourne, Australia, Hirsch observed that rather than broad cohesion historically found in just a handful of different groups, the on-the-ground reality was one of many, many splintering subcultural groupings. "And so our missionary approach

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[132] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 156.

developed into that of targeting specific groupings in the now highly tribalized urban milieu."[133] This missional-incarnational approach provided the means by which the gospel message could be transferred in a contextually resonant way. What's more, Hirsch describes how the missionary approach that began simply as a response to the fragmented social order, within a few years grew into a full-fledged church planting strategy.[134]

2.3.2. Keller: Balanced Contextualization

Of all three thought leaders explored in this thesis, Keller contributes most directly and thoroughly to the dialogue on contextualization, offering four full chapters dedicated to the subject in his work.[135] He also offers a cogent, robust definition of contextualization: "[I]t is giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them."[136] In this definition, Keller is clear that *acceptance* is not the standard by which contextualization is measured, but *understandability* is. In this way, Keller advocates for an approach to contextualization that situates a church's presence and message in a local cultural context between over-adaptation and under-adaptation.

Keller identifies what many church leaders, be they church planters or established church pastors, already intuit: that over-adaptation of a church's mission risks syncretism and the ultimate loss of the gospel message's distinctive power. However, he simultaneously argues against the opposite error of under-adaptation:

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[133] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 25.

[134] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 26.

[135] Keller, *Center Church*, 89–133. (Chapters 7-10)

[136] Keller, *Center Church*, 89.

> If we overadapt to a culture, we have accepted the culture's idols. If, however, we underadapt to a culture, we may have turned our own [church's] culture into an idol, an absolute. If we overadapt to a culture, we aren't able to change people because we are not calling them to change. If we underadapt to a culture, no one will be changed because no one will listen to us; we will be confusing, offensive, or simply unpersuasive. To the degree a ministry is overadapted or underadapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power.[137]

Identifying this tension helps to prevent falling into either ditch. For Keller, over-adaptation is not contextualization; it is cultural assimilation. Likewise, under-adaptation is not doctrinally faithful; it is cultural abdication. This balanced approach prevents both capitulation and irrelevance. As is throughout his thinking and writings, Keller's approach warns his readers and listeners of the dangers and dead ends of the extremes.

Keller's approach to contextualization is closely tied to the central concept in his writing on "gospel." He champions the Christian gospel as a "third way," neither suffocating religion nor rudderless relativism.[138] Similarly, a church plant that practices effective contextualization will find itself in the confusing place of being simultaneously attracting people and repelling people in the community.[139] This is because that is the nature of the Christian gospel itself: it affirms and challenges different cultural values in different contexts. This is the necessary dynamic between two axes that Keller identifies: "gospel" and "city" (or culture). As a church planter brings the gospel to bear in his or her city, it will offend and it will attract. One practical method of contextualization that Keller offers is the concept of 'A' doctrine and 'B' doctrine. Both are equally important and true, but only 'A' doctrine is intuitive to the culture.[140] For example, in much of the Western world, especially in more progressive cities, there is a spoken cultural value

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[137] Keller, *Center Church*, 25.

[138] Keller, *Center Church*, 66, 85, 273.

[139] Keller, *Center Church*, 25.

[140] Keller, *Center Church*, 124–26.

to care for the unhoused. Because caring for the poor is a Christian principle, this is an 'A' doctrine. However, the Christian value for sacrificial (felt personal cost) giving on behalf of the poor is not widely shared by the same Western progressives. When teaching or preaching, a savvy church planter will therefore lead with the 'A' doctrine before explaining the 'B' doctrine. This example of contextualization flows from a thorough understanding of the culture and of the biblical text, and it demonstrates Keller's emphasis on persuasion over debate.

In summary, Keller's balanced approach to contextualization is concerned with edifying those within the church, while communicating and acting in ways that simultaneously resonate with non-Christians and the unchurched. Because it is culturally engaged and biblical faithful, it can only be accomplished by leaders who are students of both the Bible *and* the local cultural context. It is a contextualization that is motivated to be understandable by the broader culture, even if it is not ultimately accepted by everyone within that culture. Contextualization is crucial to the missional engagement of a church and its ministries.

2.3.3. Stetzer: Practical Contextualization

Ed Stetzer approaches contextualization with a practical emphasis on biblical principles adapted to specific cultural contexts. He approaches contextualization as a necessary means to faithful obedience to the Great Commission.[141] How, practically speaking, are Christians and churches to go everywhere and make disciples of all kinds of peoples? Stetzer's answer is through contextualization: "God designed the gospel so the unchanging message can be put into changing 'cultural containers' to reach people where they are and to take them where they need to go."[142]

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[141] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 38–43.

[142] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 41.

Stetzer identifies "four commissionings" within Jesus's famous Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20: 1) "I am sending you," 2) "Make disciples of all nations," 3) "Preach forgiveness and repentance," and 4) "Jerusalem… to the ends of the earth." Stetzer goes so far as to say that "the Great Commission *is* church planting" because the carrying out these commissioning results in new faith communities.[143] Further, each of these components of the Great Commission requires contextualizing the Christian gospel for a particular people, time, and place. Stetzer gives the example of the nature of most Western cities today: they are multicultural, made up of many different people groups and backgrounds all living proximately. To carry out the Great Commission in such a complex context, he advocates church planters thinking "church planters need to think less about political boundaries and more about the populations who live there"[144] This is done by "adopting the posture of a missionary, joining Jesus on mission, and learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound."[145] Stetzer gives a biblical example of contextual communication by Paul in Acts 17, where the apostle speaks to Jewish and Gentile populations distinctly (verses 1-4 and 16-34, respectively). Paul engaged different subcultures based on their backgrounds. "We need to understand people in order to reach them," Stetzer concludes.[146]

Stetzer also ties the imperative for contextualization to the need for fresh innovation. Like Hirsch, he challenges local churches with becoming overly "comfortable" over time and losing outward focus and drive. Here, he combines the entrepreneurial innovation aspect with contextual resonance:

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[143] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 41.

[144] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 40.

[145] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31.

[146] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 35.

> [A] church must be comfortable with is becoming missional, always looking for the best way to reach the culture it lives in at that point in time. If anything, the church should err on the side of becoming futurists (rather than historians) in regard to culture.[147]

Stetzer concludes that this kind of forward-looking approach to gospel method and gospel communication is necessary for churches to remain (or become) biblically relevant in their local contexts and cultures. There is often an advantage here for church plants rather than established churches, because new churches can contextualize from scratch, without the need to dismantle or undo traditions.[148]

Finally, like Keller, Stetzer acknowledges the inherent challenge of contextualization. He cites Dean Gilliland:

> Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if ever there was one . . . the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor's edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences.... Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism…. Slip to the left and you tumble into syncretism."

His solution is akin to Hirsch's: ground all a new church's ministry in the *mission,* which Stetzer argues is the Great Commission and its four components outlined above. His language also echoes Keller. Where Keller talks about over- and under-adaptation, Stetzer uses the terms "too relevant" and "irrelevant" to describe the same tension.[149]

In sum, Stetzer's approach is practically concerned. If Christians and churches are to carry out the lofty goals of the Great Commission, then they must contextualize effectively and faithfully. Stetzer's pragmatic orientation, coupled with his biblical motivation, helps church planters translate contextualization principles into ministry practice.

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[147] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 33.

[148] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 33.

[149] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 105.

2.3.4. Areas of Convergence: The Necessity for Contextual Resonance

Much of Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's contributions to the subject of contextualization coalesces. All three agree on its necessity for reaching non-Christian and unchurched people, all three agree that there are risks in contextualization, and all three agree that true contextualization requires careful study of both the Bible and the local context. There is some variation in how they each define and apply contextualizing the Christian gospel and ecclesial practice, and this reveals their theological priorities: Keller's more apologetic approach, Hirsch's incarnational missiology, and Stetzer's evangelical pragmatism. Furthermore, each leader's ministry background influences their approaches: Keller carefully grounds contextualization in gospel-centered theology; Hirsch centers on incarnational Christology; Stetzer focuses on biblical missiology. While these values are shared by all, the primary emphases vary. This different ordering of values influences their practical recommendations for church planters and how contextualization shapes not just messaging but the actual forms and structures of a church. However, despite some variation, the relationship between contextualization and ecclesiology remains, and it demonstrates how deeply cultural engagement informs effective church planting.

Perhaps the strongest area of overlap is found in how they all communicate the cruciality of cultural exegesis, what Keller calls knowing the "baseline cultural narratives."[150] Without this, contextualization will fall short of its purpose: church presence and messaging that is understandable and resonant with the local cultural context. Hirsch (especially), Keller, and Stetzer are all critical of churches in the recent past that have failed to truly know and relate with the local context. Far too many churches that have "over-relied on attraction and had therefore

[150] Keller, *Center Church*, 90.

established the church on a consumerist model" rather than a *missional* model.[151] Speaking to and acting in the culture in comprehensible ways (Keller), being incarnationally present in the many and varied subcultures within a city (Hirsch), and carrying out Jesus's Great Commission (Stetzer) all require intentional contextualization.

Importantly, each thought leader also anticipates objections and address risks inherent to contextualization. They carefully address the risk of over-adaptation: syncretism to the point of a church's words and actions having little or no distinction from a particular time and place. All three also address the opposite risk of under-adaptation, with Keller doing so most forcefully. If a church has under-contextualized, not only does that result in failing its missionary directive to reach new populations, but it also means that it has "idolized" forms and practices that are at best secondary to its primary mission.[152] Too often a church's ministry efforts are like a bridge to nowhere: grounded in the Bible but disconnected from people's lives and experiences. Other times, too often a church's ministry efforts are like a bridge from nowhere: relating to people's experience but lacking biblical, Christian foundation. Resonant contextualization avoids both these errors.[153] From Keller's "theological vision" to Hirsch's "missional-incarnational impulse" to Stetzer's biblical pragmatism, church planters can draw from multiple approaches based on their specific contexts.

Finally, all three thought leaders draw on their ministry experiences that offer case studies of contextualization. Hirsch shares of his experience in South Melbourne, where he and a team of other Christians began to see and address the need for Christians to go out and be present in as many spaces and among as many subcultural groups as possible. Out of this effort was

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[151] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 77.

[152] Keller, *Center Church*, 25.

[153] Keller, *Center Church*, 101.

birthed church planting strategies that Hirsch continues to advocate and train for.[154] Keller describes how during his first years in Manhattan, it became increasingly clear that most of the young professionals that his church was encountering were skeptics of belief in general and Christianity in particular. He contrasts this to his previous experience pastoring a church in Virginia and how he needed to adjust methods accordingly.[155] For his part, Stetzer includes numerous examples of church plants and church planting leaders engaging their cities in creative ways.[156]

The convergence of the approaches from Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer suggests that effective contextualization — contextualization that resonates with the non-Christian or unchurched person — requires both theological depth and cultural insight, balanced with faithful adherence to biblical principles. In this way, churches, church plants, and church leaders can meaningfully engage with contemporary culture.

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[154] *About Us | Verge Network*, n.d., accessed April 9, 2024, https://vergenetwork.org/about/; "Forge Global," Forge Global, accessed July 1, 2024, https://www.forgeinternational.com.

[155] Keller, *Center Church*, 121.

[156] Several such examples can be found in *Planting Missional Churches*, 76.

3. Application

Can established churches adapt church planting mindsets and strategies to better reach those in their communities who are not yet practitioners of the Christian faith? As discussed in Part 1, data show two simultaneous trends: First, there is the well-documented decline of churchgoing and religious adherence in the United States. While there is very recent evidence that this may be slowing or even reversing,[157] the broad multi-decade drift is clear. Second, over the same period, new church plants have demonstrated a greater aptitude for connecting with and engaging non-Christian and unchurched people in their communities. When compared to established churches, church plants enjoy greater percentages of baptisms and conversions among attendees, as well as higher percentages of attendees who did not transfer from other churches.

Having surveyed the contributions of three prominent Protestant church planting leaders of the last twenty-five years in Part 2, with an eye specifically to what they have advocated for reaching non-Christian and unchurched people, I now move to synthesis and application of their contributions. As their writing relates to reaching new people, Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer each identify the importance of evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance. With these areas identified and described, I will now turn to distilling an applicable framework for reaching non-Christian and unchurched people that can be adapted by established churches.

3.1. Toward a Framework

Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's chief ideas about church plants reaching non-Christians — evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance — can be applied

[157] Gregory A Smith et al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off," *Pew Research Center*, February 26, 2025.

by churches of any age. These three categories, and the authors' ecclesial emphases behind them, help to create a scaffolding for a framework. In this way, rather than a simple checklist (e.g. "Are we evangelizing, innovating, and contextualizing?") a framework will provide more robust tool that can be adapted to different churches with different leaders in different places.

In this section, I will lay out two different ecclesial continuums: 1) the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, and 2) the institutional church and the organic church. I will show how these are reflected in the writing of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer as they discuss church planting. These continuums form a framework within which to locate the full scope of a church's ministry expressions. Crucially, I will demonstrate how this framework will provide a means by which evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance can be infused into virtually every aspect of a church's life and ministry. Finally, I will supply examples and typologies of this framework in practice. Taken together, this will provide established churches a place to start and to develop more intentional and effective overtures to non-Christian and unchurched people in their communities.

3.1.1. Framework 1: The Great Commandment and the Great Commission

A full understanding of local church expression will consider both Jesus's *Great Commandment* and his *Great Commission.*[158] As referenced above, the Great Commission is explicitly cited by Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer as a motivating force behind church planting, especially its evangelistic impulse. Likewise, the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 or the Great Commandment of Matthew 22 also pervades the appeals of all three interlocutors. The identity of God the Son as Lord and his rightful place in the hearts of people form the central reality driving

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[158] See Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 22:34-40, Matthew 28:18-20, and Acts 1:7-9. Pairing the Great Commandment and Great Commission was popularized by another church planter: Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Zondervan Pub, 1995), 102, https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE002042594.

church planting mission. Church planter Rick Warren identifies the Great Commandment and Great Commission as central to the planting and flourishing of Saddleback Church. He says "although many [biblical] passages describe what the church is to be and do, two statements by Jesus summarize it all: the Great Commandment and the Great Commission."[159] Warren goes onto list "five purposes of the church" which he extracts from these two key scriptures: worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and service.[160]

The Great Commandment defines a church's center (*worship*) while the Great Commission defines its frontier (*mission*.) These two components form the first layer of the framework, which can be illustrated by a horizontal line with Great Commandment (*Shema*) on one side and the Great Commission on the other (see Figure 3.1). Here I will present Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's contributions as they relate to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

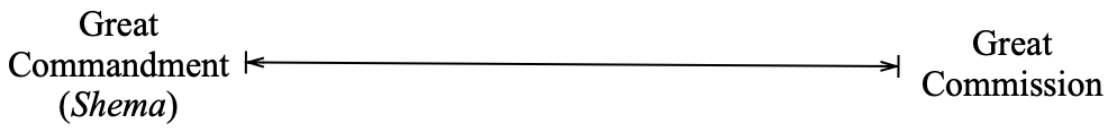

Figure 3.1

[159] Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 102. I removed Warren's parenthetical Bible references from the quote since the passages have already been cited above.

[160] Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 103–7.

3.1.1.1. Hirsch on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

Of the three thought leaders, Hirsch cites the Great Commandment most forcefully. He refers to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 (which Jesus declares as "the first" commandment in Matthew 6:29) as foundational to the missional DNA of a church or church plant.[161] He says,

> [*The Shema*] not only constitutes the basis of worship… but also sets the agenda for the central religious task of discipleship. It is a call for the Israelite to live his or her life under the saving lordship of one God and not under the tyranny of many gods…. God's kingdom claim to loyalty is comprehensive in scope.[162]

Hirsch continues by drawing a straight line from the Old Testament *Shema* to the New Testament Jesus, making "Jesus is Lord" the centerpiece of his missional DNA idiom.[163] In effect, Hirsch argues that without loving and worshiping one almighty God, incarnate in God the Son, there is no foundation for the mission of the Great Commission. Hirsch sees "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart"[164] as the central confession and organizing principle of apostolic movements.

3.1.1.2. Keller on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

For Keller's part, while he does not directly quote the *Shema* in *Center Church*, his writing still emphasizes its centrality in a church's mission. In the book's section on "Gospel," Keller succinctly echoes Jesus's teaching on the Great Commandment: "God created us to adore and serve him and to love others."[165] Keller dedicates a large portion of his writing book to

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[161] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 146–51.

[162] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 149.

[163] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 151.

[164] Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (NRSV)

[165] Keller, *Center Church*, 34. For Jesus's teaching, see Matthew 33:34-40

positioning the Christian gospel as central to church and church planting ministries. Without doctrine and belief firmly grounded in the person and work of Jesus, church planting will be ineffective. He uses Deuteronomy 4:6-8 to show that "[i]n the Old Testament, mission was centripetal; the flow was in toward the center. Israel was called to be an obedient people, becoming a society that displayed God's glory for the nations." He then says that Jesus's commission in Matthew 28 contrasts as the "mission becomes centrifugal — moving outward from the center. The people of God are sent out to the world to proclaim the gospel."[166]

3.1.1.3. Stetzer on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

Stetzer directly speaks of both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, also linking them with the "cultural mandate" found in Genesis 1:28. Using a term from Kevin Vanhoozer, he says that a church plant's showing, serving, and sending is a "theater of the gospel."[167] Stetzer expounds,

> "God's kingdom is not just about evangelism, mercy, or justice; it is also about bringing all of life, every sphere of life, under his rule and reign. In other words, participation in King Jesus' mission takes the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37–39), and the cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) seriously."[168]

For Stetzer, as with Hirsch and Keller, the fundamental message of the *Shema* — who God is and who people are in relationship to him — is both prerequisite and motivator for a church plant's carrying out the Great Commission. Churches are called to both biblical theology and biblical mission.

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[166] Keller, *Center Church*, 147.

[167] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 30.

[168] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 30.

3.1.1.4. Great Commandment and Great Commission Conclusion

Interestingly, all three thought leaders make a connection between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. "Hear oh Israel" is reflected today in churches' liturgies, and "the Lord your God is one" is reflected in churches' doctrine and worship. The subject of this liturgy, doctrine, and worship is Jesus Christ, who "became flesh and lived among us."[169] Churches are therefore motivated to follow and imitate him, heeding his command to "go therefore" into the world expressing the gospel message in word and in deed.[170] Out of the central confession of the *Shema,* flows the missional-incarnational impulse of a church plant, expressed in community outreaches, funding of local and foreign missions, and more. Later in this study, I will further discuss these and other examples, and how situating ministry initiatives in relationship to the Great Commandment (doctrine, liturgy, ordinances, etc.) and Great Commission ("going," mission, outreach, etc.) empowers church leaders toward evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance.

3.1.2. Framework 2: Institutional and Organic

A full understanding of local church expression will also consider both its *institutional* and the *organic* aspects. These two components of the framework are found throughout the contributions of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer. Both Hirsch[171] and Keller[172] cite these explicitly. While Stetzer uses these categories unambiguously when distinguishing "simple" churches, and they can be found conceptually throughout *Planting Missional Churches.*[173] A thriving church

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[169] John 1:14 (NRSV).

[170] Matthew 28:19 (NRSV).

[171] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 93.

[172] Keller, *Center Church*, 231–32.

[173] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 101.

will function both institutionally and organically. Institutionally, a church will make decisions about leadership and doctrine, for example. Organically, for example, a church will be expressed in and through its members, as they live, work, study, and play out in the world. The presence and interplay of these expressions within a local church is closely related to a church's vitality.[174] These two components form the second layer of the framework, which can be illustrated by a vertical line with "Institutional" below and "Organic" above (see Figure 3.2). Here I will present Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's main contributions to the conversation around the organic and institutional nature of church plants.

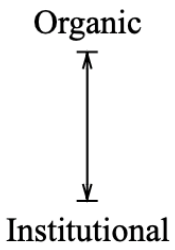

Figure 3.2

3.1.2.1. Hirsch on the institutional church and the organic church

Hirsch's language calls attention especially to the organic nature of a local church with his discussion of the "the outgoing thrust of Jesus movements, like the scattering of seeds or of the dispersion of bacteria in a sneeze."[175] These are Christian people carrying out their daily lives among others in the broader culture and marketplace. When intentional, the organic church has incredible potential to contextualize and effectively evangelize. Like bacteria, the message spreads. Furthermore, this scattering nature makes it possible to really know, and therefore understand, the community context. One of Hirsch's sharpest critiques is that many popular

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[174] Keller, *Center Church*, 232.

[175] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 146; 207.

church growth models attempt to attract outside people to a church rather than sending inside people out into society.[176]

Hirsch's emphasis on the organic side does not negate his appreciation of the importance of institutional church qualities. "[T]here needs to be a clear distinction between necessary organizational structure and institutional-ism."[177] Hirsch is not against institution *per se,* but against the self-protective stasis that institutions can unintentionally or intentionally develop. In contrast, a thriving church plant will be dynamic and help to catalyze a dynamic movement within a city or region. His advocacy for the importance of varied ecclesial roles via his APEST model (apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding, and teaching) is perhaps the clearest example of an institutional contribution. Furthermore, Hirsch's drawing of these functions from Ephesians 4 is in itself an example of the necessity of institutional church as expressed through the canon of Scripture. For Hirsch, institutional strength should be coupled with organic dynamism. He illustrates this by contrasting *movement* with *monument*: "We choose either to live into the more dynamic missional movement paradigm or to continue to operate from within the more static monument paradigm that we have inherited."[178] It is not the elimination of structures, but the addition of flexibility and adaptability to those structures that Hirsch advocates.

The APEST assessments and toolkits are intentionally systematic in their approach, yet they serve the flexible, organic nature of the church's mission. Within what Hirsch calls the "APEST culture" of "mDNA," are examples of helping to identify those leadership qualities that are needed for a full expression of church planting movement. Hirsch's understanding of the organic and institutional nature of churches can be observed in each of the three primary

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[176] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 105.

[177] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 49.

[178] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 26.

overlapping areas of church planting efficacy among non-Christian and unchurched people (evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance) that are addressed above in this study.

3.1.2.2. Keller on the institutional church and the organic church

Beyond Keller's writing, much of his work was institution-building. Not only was Redeemer Presbyterian Church planted in Manhattan, the church plant-equipping organization Redeemer City to City and the publisher Gospel in Life were also birthed from Keller's efforts. As it relates to church planting specifically, Keller's emphasis simply on "the gospel" is the clearest example of the institutional expression of the church. A gospel-centered doctrine — that is, one strongly oriented around the person and work of Jesus — is foremost in Keller's writing and speaking. The first third of his primary work on church planting, is dedicated to "gospel." Without this fundamental doctrine, the work of a local church and ministry leaders will not ultimately succeed. "The gospel is a message about how we have been rescued from peril"[179] is but one of many descriptions of the Christian good news in Keller's treatise. Keller's gospel-centrality offers a clear example institutional-doctrinal ecclesial expression.

While Keller is a champion of gospel-centered doctrine and liturgy and is instrumental in his institution-building, he also recognized that effective churches need organic expression as well. In 2009, for example, many years after Redeemer had been planted, Keller advocated for a return to some of its organic qualities that permeated its early days: Christian people out in the world living, acting, speaking, and connecting in intentionally Christian ways.[180] He called this organic aspect of church "movement." Through the activity of believers — each in their

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[179] Keller, *Center Church*, 29.

[180] Timothy Keller, "Renew Interview: Movement Dynamics," November 4, 2009, Video, https://vimeo.com/7433143.

respective spheres of work, study, home, and play — movement is catalyzed and propagated across a neighborhood, city, or region. Keller explicitly ties the organic and institutional aspects of church to the carrying out the Great Commission: "A church that is educating and discipling people to do justice in the public sphere will have to be sensitive to social issues and ills in its teaching and preaching, and yet it will not make the fatal mistake of becoming a lobbying group and losing sight of its main mission."[181] In other words, a church can remain institutionally focused on contextualizing and sharing the good news about Jesus *and* organically impact its larger context through its people living and working as disciples of Jesus in their respective spheres. In this way, a church can avoid the twin errors of reducing its mission to spiritual needs at the expense of social justice, or of diluting the gospel distinctive and discipleship mandate in pursuit of social justice.

3.1.2.3. Stetzer on the institutional church and the organic church

While Stetzer only explicitly employs the terms "institutional" versus "organic" when distinguishing "simple" churches, he does address this ecclesial reality throughout his writing, most often noting key tensions. He identifies areas where the institutional instinct of church planting leaders often impedes a church's missional nature: professional and lay ministry,[182] New Testament patterns versus modern structures,[183] and biblical qualifications versus institutional requirements.[184] In each of these areas institutional preservation or institutional propagation can easily become blockers to the true missional nature of a new church endeavor. A healthy

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[181] Keller, *Center Church*, 232.

[182] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 16–17.

[183] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 28.

[184] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 54.

understanding and application of the more organic qualities of a church is an important counterweight to balance these common institutional excesses. Stetzer writes,

> "The concept of being incarnational as it relates to church planting emphasizes the importance of relationships in effective church planting. It's not about establishing a location for worship; it's about establishing a basis for coming together in the first place. Good church planting depends on good relationships."[185]

However, Stetzer also recognizes the importance of some institutional expressions in a new church plant. While he critiques over-institutionalization, he strongly emphasizes the importance of doctrinal foundations and certain institutional safeguards. Like Keller, he cites sound theology as essential for any church planting endeavor.[186] Like Hirsch, he cites the assessment, training, and accountability for church planting leaders.[187] He summarizes the tension, "The end goal, at least for our purposes, is to establish biblical new churches that are culturally relevant... Effective, missional, and biblically sound churches can be planted. These churches will engage the culture while remaining faithful to the 'faith once delivered to the saints' (Jude 3)."[188] Stetzer presents a need for both the institutional ensuring of biblical faithfulness and the organic nature of Spirit-led multiplication and relationships. The content of the gospel must remain unchanged *and* true contextualization is forged through incarnational mission.

3.1.2.4. Institutional and Organic Conclusion

In the work of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer, churches are understood both from an "institutional" and from an "organic" standpoint. Keller contrasts these terms explicitly, but the concepts are found in Stetzer and in Hirsch as well. Hirsch is most critical of a church's institutional features overwhelming and suffocating incarnational mission. However, he also

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[185] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 11.

[186] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 34.

[187] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 59–68.

[188] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 37.

recognizes the importance of those organizational structures which propel church ministries out into society. All three cite the tendency for church structures to ossify and ultimately impede efficacy, especially in reaching non-Christian and unchurched people. Yet, all three also cite the important ways that structures, systems, and crucially, doctrine, undergird vital church planting mission. For Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer church plants and churches should be at once both institutional (theologically grounded and uncompromising in gospel-centrality) and organic (fluid, responsive, and incarnational) aspects that enable it to embed in the life and culture of its context. All three thought leaders agree that both the institutional and the organic are indispensable. Finally, and perhaps most notably, each of the authors cite over-institutionalization as a greater risk to effective church planting than over-emphasis on the organic because of institutions' inherent self-protective nature.

For a church to thrive it must have both institutional and organic expressions. Any language without institutionalized components like grammar, shared definitions, and standards would devolve into unintelligibility.[189] However, a language without its organic components like casual conversation, slang, and everyday lived speech would fade into irrelevance.[190] So too any church requires both institutional and organic aspects. Ministry that is initiated by the clergy is usually institutional: programmatic outreaches, sermon preparation and delivery, Sunday liturgies, training and credentialing, staffing, budgeting, and facilities, for example. Ministry that is initiated by the laity is usually organic: hospitality in private homes or invitation in the workplace to read the Bible together, for example.[191] These and other numerous examples display

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[189] Stephen A. Wurm, "Language Death and Disappearance: Causes and Circumstances," *Diogenes* 39, no. 153 (March 1991): 5, https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219103915302.

[190] Wurm, "Language Death and Disappearance," 6–7.

[191] Russell Shorto, "Faith at Work," Magazine, *The New York Times*, October 31, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/31/magazine/faith-at-work.html; Jennifer Miller, "What Happens When the Boss

practical ways the framework comes together. In the next section, I will further discuss how situating ministry initiatives in relationship to the organic church and the institutional church helps to empower churches toward evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance in virtually everything they do.

3.2. Completing the Framework

Having examined the writings of Keller, Hirsch, and Stetzer, three shared emphases emerge for how church plants can effectively reach non-Christian and unchurched people: evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance. When these emphases are set alongside two ecclesial continuums — the Great Commandment/Great Commission and institutional/organic church expressions — a more comprehensive framework takes shape. Plotted on intersecting horizontal and vertical axes, these continuums form a two-by-two grid (Figure 3.3), within which four quadrants illustrate distinct yet complementary ways the church embodies its mission. Here I will briefly define each quadrant in turn, offering a brief description as well as biblical and contemporary examples of church expressions for each. Later, I will describe in practical terms how established churches can apply this framework to become more evangelistic, innovative, and contextualized for the sake of unchurched and non-Christian people in their communities.

Invites You to Bible Study?," Business, *The New York Times*, September 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/22/business/religion-work-diversity-equity-inclusion.html.

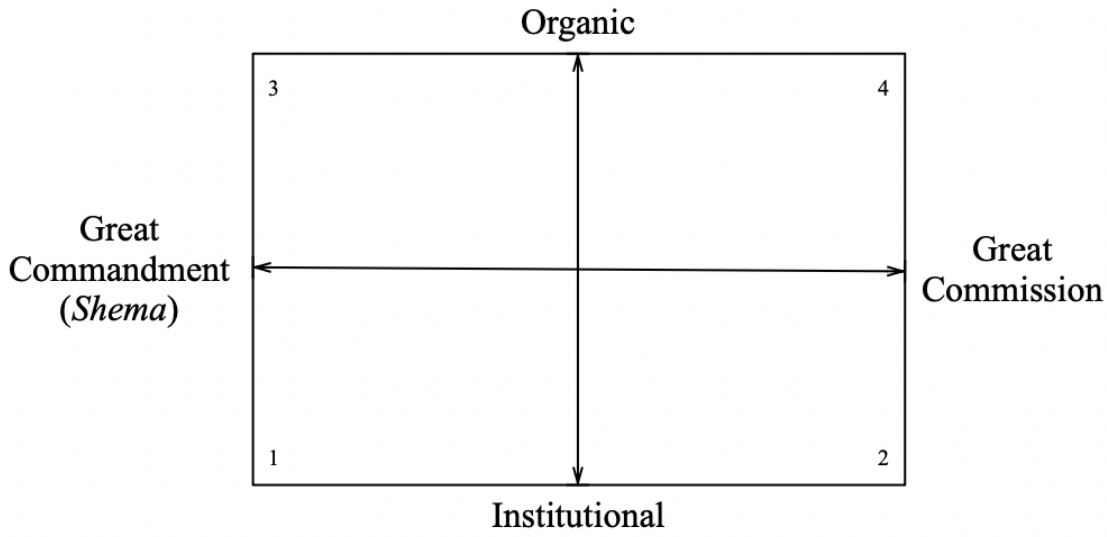

Figure 3.3

3.2.1. Quadrant 1: Institutional Church and the Great Commandment

Quadrant 1 represents the overlap between the institutional life of the church and the Great Commandment. Here the focus is on worship, proclamation, and the shared practices that declare who God is and form people in love toward him and one another. While there is overlap among all five of Warren's purposes and this framework's quadrants, his purposes of *worship, fellowship,* and *discipleship* can be most easily identified in quadrant 1. Ecclesial expressions in this quadrant include (but are not limited to) Sunday liturgy, the Lord's Supper, and the baptism of new believers. These embody the Shema's call to both "hear" and to "love." These activities are institutional in that they are ordered and administered by pastoral or denominational leadership. Biblical parallels can be found in the regular gatherings of the early church in homes and synagogues where structured worship and communal devotion were central,[192] or in the first

[192] E.g. Acts 2:42–47, 9:19-20; Romans 16:5

church council convened to discuss and ratify the early church's position on integrating non-jews into the fellowship of believers.[193]

3.2.2. Quadrant 2: Institutional Church and the Great Commission

Quadrant 2 highlights the institutional expression of the Great Commission. Warren's purposes of *service* and *evangelism* can be seen here. Activities here include a church's outreach programs, mercy ministries, and organized mission efforts at home and abroad. Such expressions are institutional because they typically rely on church budgets, decision-making structures, and coordinated leadership. At the same time, they are Commission-oriented because they extend the gospel outward through proclamation and service to those not yet reached. A biblical precedent is Paul's missionary journeys, which — though sometimes catalyzed by individual initiative — were undergirded by the sending and support of established congregations.[194] This quadrant shows how churches harness institutional resources to extend the good news beyond their gatherings.

3.2.3. Quadrant 3: Organic Church and the Great Commandment

Quadrant 3 shifts the focus from institutional expressions to organic ones, emphasizing spontaneous, relational acts of faith that resonate with the Great Commandment. A common example of this kind of church expression is found in the simple invitation from a congregant to a friend or neighbor to join them at a church service or church event. A personal invitation like this is organic because it is spontaneous (not organized by the church's calendar) and it comes from a layperson (not from clergy, church staff, or church communications channels.) It reflects the Great Commandment because it is an expression of love toward God in testimony and toward

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[193] Acts 15

[194] E.g. Acts 13:1-3; 14:23-28

neighbor in invitation, and because it is intrinsically connected to a church's proclamation and worship. A biblical image of this dynamic is Lydia. Lydia, a lay leader and marketplace professional, demonstrated her personal love for God and people in a tangible form that overlapped with her church's institutional gathering by opening her home for the church in Philippi.[195]

3.2.4. Quadrant 4: Organic Church and the Great Commission

Quadrant 4 represents potentially the most transformative space: the overlap between the organic life of believers and the Great Commission. Here individual Christians integrate their faith into daily settings, oftentimes in costly or countercultural ways. A believer advocating for financial transparency in the workplace, a student refusing to outsource integrity to artificial intelligence, or a parent raising children with reference to God's fatherhood are just a few examples of this quadrant. These actions are organic because they are not formally commissioned or programmed by church leadership, yet they are missional because they embody and extend the gospel out into public life.

Zacchaeus's radical transformation of his business practices after encountering Jesus stands as a biblical archetype.[196] Zaccheaus's conversion resulted in more than religious repentance; it produced a total rearranging of his life priorities and financial understanding. He repented, *and* he also gave prodigiously. In Zaccheaus, we can see the organic church, expressed in an utterly changed individual. We can also see the "go" of the Great Commission — a businessman out in the world practicing discipleship to Jesus rather than to wealth. Ironically, although this quadrant allows for an almost infinite variety of expressions, it is often the most

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[195] Acts 16:15, 40

[196] Luke 19:1–10

difficult for church leaders to name, nurture, and celebrate, precisely because it lies outside institutional structures.

Above, I have offered a brief description, a biblical example, and a contemporary example of each of the quadrants. (See Figure 3.4.) Now I will move onto the application of the framework.

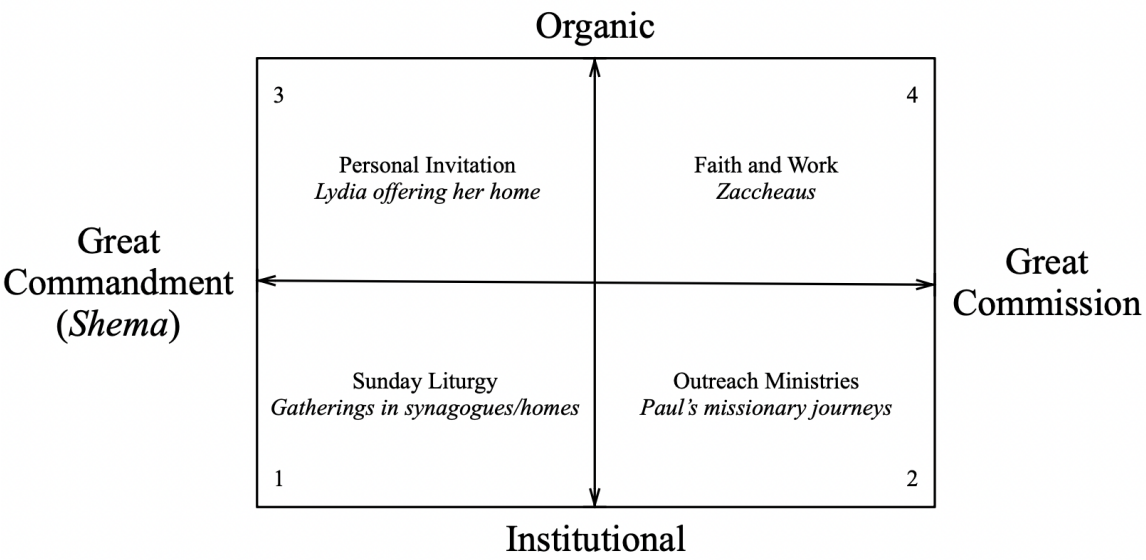

Figure 3.4

3.3. Applying the Framework

Already, this framework provides a readymade tool for church leaders to take stock of what their churches are doing, what roles they invest in, what classes or cohorts they offer, what people or organizations they engage, and how their congregants might be living their faith outside of gathered church activities. A pastor or a ministry team might spend time thinking through this rubric and listing all relevant activities, personnel, and resources they allocate to each quadrant (see Figure 3.5 for an example). Many churches, even relatively small ones, will find that they have more to list than there is room for on a small diagram. Other things may come into focus as well. Perhaps there is a ministry that straddles two or more quadrants or is listed in more than one

quadrant. The exercise might raise new questions: Is the same person listed multiple times in multiple places? Are one or two of the quadrants overflowing, while the others are bare? Are things that the church is doing that do not really fit anywhere? Finally, this will almost certainly prompt conversations that can be leveraged to promote new initiatives or toss out obsolete structures or activities. A church leader or ministry team would do well to spend the time required to carefully catalog all that the church is doing using this rubric.

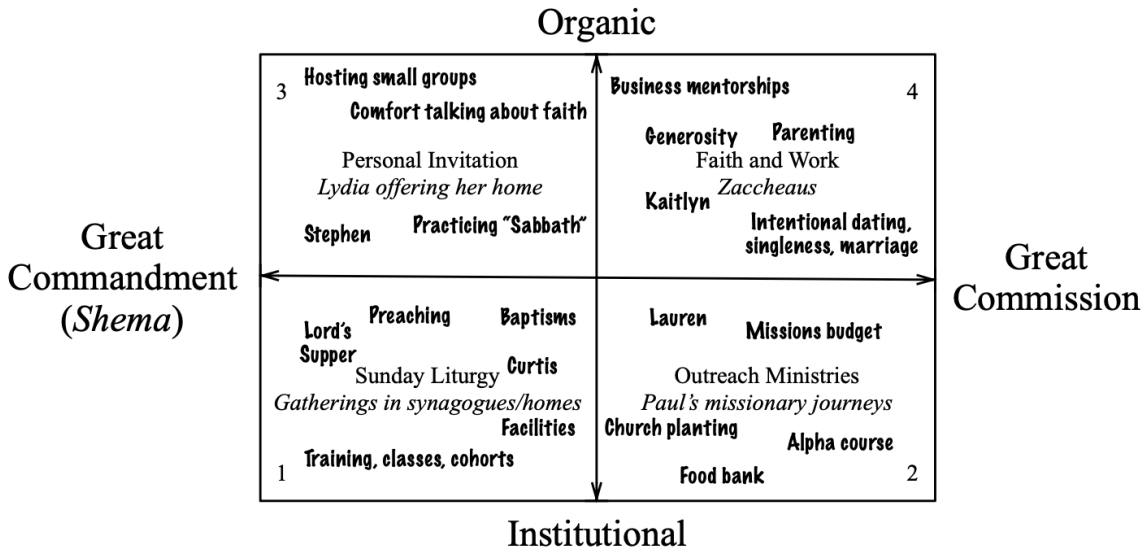

Figure 3.5

Figure 3.5 shows an example of how this process could unfold for a church leadership or staff team. While Warren does not explicitly include "organic" and "institutional" in his model, his "five purposes" can still be seen here in the varied expression of a church. It's easy to imagine the various places that a church's activity for worship, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, and service might be located within the framework.

3.3.1. More than Balance

A church can use this framework to take stock, identifying balance or imbalance across the quadrants. While maintaining a healthy balance is important for a thriving church, the subject

of this thesis is not merely about achieving balance.[197] It is how established churches can adapt church planting principles to become more effective at reaching non-Christians and the unchurched. A church that wants to catalyze engagement among new people cannot merely allocate equal effort into each quadrant. The aim is to draw increasing numbers of people who are not yet part of any church into contact with a local church community. For this to happen, the center of gravity must change. This is accomplished by infusing the three emphases identified in Part 2 of this study into every aspect of a church's ministry. I will elaborate more on the infusion of evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance below.

It is my observation — supported by the warnings of our three thought leaders — that over time the gravitational pull of church ministry tends to shift toward the bottom left of the framework (see Figure 3.6). This is understandable: pastors and leaders become increasingly skillful at communicating with the people who are present, initiatives become traditions, and group needs within the congregation obfuscate the evangelistic opportunities outside the congregation. When Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer warn against the stasis that results from over-institutionalization, they are shifting the center of gravity away from the bottom left and toward the upper right.

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[197] Balance in church ministry is important. One of the primary texts for this study advocates for "Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City" in its title. Keller, *Center Church*; See also, Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Abingdon Press, 2003), https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE003255055.

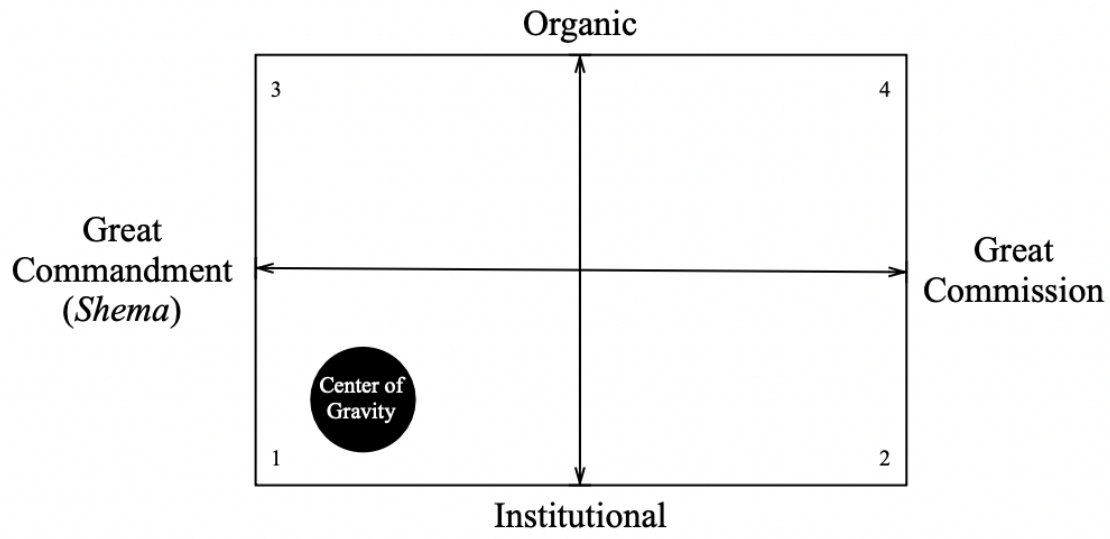

Figure 3.6

Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's advocacy for evangelism, innovation, and contextualization, work to pull a church's mission in the direction of *organism* and *mission*. As outlined above, this does not mean abandoning the institutional aspects of a church nor neglecting a congregation's foundational relationship to God as Lord. It does mean aiming a church's institutional and doctrinal resources toward missional and incarnational expression. The institution should be allocated *toward* empowering the organic. Likewise, the Commandment should be aimed toward advancing the Commission (see Figure 3.7). This is movement is a key differentiator in many church plants when compared to many established churches. When everything they do and say has the non-Christian and unchurched person in mind, mission and outward expression are tightly integrated into the full scope of ministry.

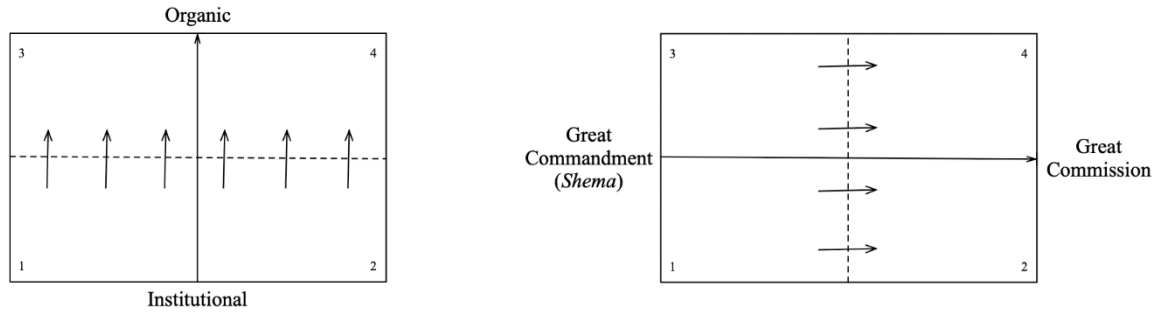

Figure 3.7

3.3.1.1. Moving the Center of Gravity: Eight Typologies and One Biblical Example

A church plant in Baltimore configured their small groups ministry to look familiar to young professionals who have a category for "meet-ups" but who have never heard of "church home groups." The small groups run in 8-week cycles, ensuring no one feels like an outsider because everyone is jumping into a new meet-up together every couple of months. The groups are varied: some meetups hike a nearby trail together, some form book clubs using a Christian resource, others discuss the teaching from Sunday together, and a new parents' group walks a park with their strollers. This is the institutional church moving "up" into the organic church by recognizing and empowering talents for hospitality and outreach within ordinary people. The institutional church provides structure for sign-ups, and training for group leaders, empowering both leaders and meet-up attendees to do the kinds of things that they might normally do, but now with intentionality and in Jesus's name. This is also the Great Commandment moving "out" into the Great Commission by mobilizing the doctrine of evangelism into a form that everyday people will readily invite others into, because it is the kind of thing that they would already invite others into. Evangelistic impulse compelled this church to innovate small groups in a way that contextually resonates with unchurched individuals. Grounding in the worship and mission of God ensures the groups also create pathways to introduce people to the life and work of Jesus.

A church plant in San Francisco ensures each discussion guide for their bible studies always addresses the non-Christian. When crafting icebreakers and questions, the team carefully avoids any use of "we" and "us" that refers only to Christians or churchgoers. Those pronouns are instead used for universal human experiences. When asking questions of Christians, they address them: "If you're a Christian, how does Daniel's story make you think about your own prayer life?" When asking questions of non-Christians, they address them, "If you don't identify as a Christian, what do you find attractive or challenging about Daniel's response to the king?" When addressing anyone, they use *we, us,* and *our*: "What does our society have in common with Daniel's society?" In this way, these study guides ensure that attendees who are exploring the Christian faith feel *talked to*, not *talked about*. Moreover, they show the Christians involved ways they can talk to their non-Christian friends, and they communicate that this is a safe place to invite those friends into. This kind of Bible discussion honors the *Shema* helping everyone involved to "hear" who is the Lord God. It is designed from the ground up with the non-Christian in mind, moving the center of gravity of the church's ministry expression up and out.

A church planter in New York City takes the time to manuscript each of his sermons, not to preach from, but to review with a newly converted Christian or a non-Christian who attends the church. He asks, "What makes sense here? What is confusing? What do you instinctually agree or disagree with?" These conversations help him to better shape his messages to be comprehensible to those who do not yet believe, while also giving him one-on-one time with new people in his community. Time does not permit him to do this every week, but he makes this a regular practice, scheduling the time once or twice a month. He does this because he does not want to merely speak the Christian gospel in Sunday's sermon. He wants its truth to resonate in the hearts of the hearers. Whether or not someone chooses to believe is not up to him, but he knows that contextual resonance opens a door to new faith. This kind of preaching is motivated not by less

concern for the holiness of God's word, but by *more* of it, because the preacher is taking to heart that God desires everyone to be saved. In this way, he helps to move the sermon (institution) and doctrine (Commandment) into the everyday life (organic) of non-Christians (Commission).

A church plant in Paris recognizes that 90% of people attending on Sunday have never attended a Protestant church service, and that the last time they attended any church service of any kind was likely years or decades ago. Each week, the leadership team prepares a Sunday service pamphlet that not only provides an order of service, but a brief description of each part of the liturgy. One or two sentences are given for "worship in song," "prayer of confession," "teaching," and "the Lord's Supper" that provide a brief description, some historical context, and an example. For the uninitiated, this printout helps them to understand the service as it progresses without feeling self-conscious. Everyone follows along with the same paper guide, members and newcomers alike. In this way the institution and Great Commandment are pushed up and out in mission to those people who are not yet believers.

A church plant in Los Angeles organized its staff meetings around "volunteer staff." The church planter recognized early that if the church was going to be effective in a context with very few Christians or churched people, it would need to enlist far more manpower than a lean start-up staff team. Identifying those people consistently present at church events, the church planter invited them to also participate actively in church staff meetings. These participants were named "volunteer staff," outfitted with staff shirts to wear on Sundays, and were listed on the website. In staff meetings, they treated them as part of the team, asking for their input on new initiatives. These volunteer staff sometimes served for just a season, sometimes for a year or two. Most were believing Christians, but not all were. The presence and recognized roles of the volunteer staff communicated to them and to the church broadly the importance of every individual in the church. Moreover, having them in meetings served as a training ground, showing them what

church work and Christian concern for a city can look like. Crucially, these volunteer staff opened doors to places and people in the city that the clergy would not even know about, let alone have access to. This work is a representation of the church institutional (clergy) empowering the church organic ("volunteer staff"), fueled by the Great Commandment (hearing and loving God) to practice the Great Commission (going out into the world).

A church plant in Mexico City reimagined how it educated people about the meaning of following Jesus and being baptized. They had offered baptism classes for a little over a year. While these classes successfully introduced some new people to the Christian faith, the leaders felt that this effort was not adequately capturing the vision for their congregation to be an "evangelizing church." So, they tried something new. Rather than an introductory class on what it means to follow Jesus and be baptized, the new class was a practical "how-to" for reading the gospel of Mark together with a friend, family member, or colleague.[198] Formerly, baptism classes were taught by church ministry staff, designed only for candidates preparing to be baptized. Now, the church offers open sessions that train lay people to read the Gospel of Mark with non-Christian friends, equipping ordinary members to facilitate discovery rather than merely attend instruction. The congregation moved from counting only baptisms performed to counting what baptisms were catalyzed by laypeople in their congregation. Baptism stories are now told as communal testimonies, highlighting the friendships of hospitality and witness that precede the moment of immersion. By equipping and unleashing everyday Christians, the congregation could now say that they were on their way to becoming a truly evangelizing church. In this way, the ministry exemplifies this church's movement upward from the institutional into the organic, and outward from the Great Commandment into the Great Commission.

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[198] See one such guide here: David R. Helm, *One to One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* (Sydney, N.S.W.: Matthias Media, 2020).

A new church was just getting started in Long Island shortly after the 2020 pandemic hit. Surveying their hurting community, the church plant leadership recognized that local small businesses were not unlike the church plant: struggling and in danger of closing their doors forever. Instead of a conventional mailer campaign, the church plant reallocated those resources to sponsor small businesses on two blocks of Main Street just in time for Christmas. They met business owners in person and started a social media campaign called "12 Days of Christmas." Each of the twelve days, the church plant sponsored a business with a promotion like "the first 50 guests on receive a free donut with their coffee" and "the first 50 guests receive 20% off the printing and mailing services." The church needed people in order to survive, and local businesses needed customers. By first asking, "What does the community *outside* our walls need?" the church was able to authentically serve their city in a meaningful way. As a byproduct, dozens community businesses people and hundreds of residents discovered the new church plant. The church plant was able to push up and out its activity, and the community resonated with deeply with the outreach.

A church plant in Phoenix started Sunday service meeting in a downtown warehouse. Rather than compete with the surrounding galleries and artist spaces in the area, they joined them, opening the common areas of the facility before and after church services. The church asked for input from art dealers and configured the space to host pieces from local artists. Within weeks, the new church was thought of as part of the community, rather than a disruption to it. Meeting and knowing more in the art community prompted the church leadership to make "Beauty and Truth" sermon series a recurring part of its teaching calendar. Engaging with the neighborhood first using its own vernacular opened the door to new conversations in the Christian vernacular. Because the people of the neighborhood found the church's participation in the local art scene so disarming, artists also began participating in church services, many for the very first time. This

illustrates a church harnessing its theology (loving God and people) for the sake of its mission (go and make disciples).

In Athens, a church planter carefully shapes his speech to the local people in terms they understand, even quoting their poets, rather than using insider categories. He speaks to them, not about them.[199] This church planter also instructs all believers to do the same as he did: "walking in wisdom toward outsiders" and to ensure their speech is "gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."[200] His concern for gospel truth and his care for the church do not close him off to the outside world, but the opposite.

In each of these examples, typical church ministry (small groups, Bible studies, sermons, liturgy, outreach, and classes) is innovatively infused with evangelistic focus, and contextual resonance. Church plants and established churches alike can try new things and invest in new ways specifically with the non-Christian person in mind. In so doing, instead of gospel centrality being lost or diluted, it is captured and intensified. Across these typologies, several shared convictions emerge. Each demonstrates that faithful innovation arises where the institutional and organic dimensions of the church converge—where structured forms serve to release ordinary believers into missional agency. Whether through reimagined small groups, contextualized Bible studies, relational preaching, or community partnerships, these churches embody what Alan Hirsch calls the *missional-incarnational impulse*: moving both "outward" into culture and "deep" into discipleship. Likewise, as Ed Stetzer insists, they integrate the Great Commandment and Great Commission, holding evangelism and love of neighbor in dynamic balance. Timothy Keller's emphasis on contextualization is also evident throughout, as each example translates

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[199] Acts 17:22-23

[200] Colossians 4:5-6

gospel truth into forms recognizable and hospitable to outsiders. Taken together, these case studies suggest that the renewal of mission in post-Christian contexts depends not on abandoning the church's institutions, but on their continual reorientation toward God's redemptive purpose—mobilizing the whole people of God for the whole mission of God.

3.3.1.2. The Special Importance of Quadrant 4

Each in its own way, the typologies above recognize that engaging the fourth quadrant is critical in an age of declining churchgoing and Christian belief. While quadrant 4 represents everyday people of the church living out their faith out in the world ("missional" in the parlance of Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer), this does not mean that there is not work to be done by the clergy and institutional church. A professional ecclesial leadership that recognizes and invests into quadrant 4 will see the kind of fruit that reverses the tendency for churchgoers to be merely consumptive. As Hirsch described in some of his own church planting story, "In order to ensure that we fulfilled the church's mandate to 'make disciples,' we simply had to reverse the ratio of active to passive (from 20:80 to 80:20) in order to move away from being a vendor of religious goods and services."[201] Similarly, on this point Keller quotes Newbigin:

> We need to create, above all, possibilities in every congregation for laypeople to seek illumination from the gospel for their daily secular duty… The work of scientists, economists, political philosophers, artists and others [must be] illuminated by insights derived from rigorous theological thinking. For such a declericalized theology, the role of the church will be that of servant, not mistress.[202]

When Newbigin begins this statement with "we," he enlists the work of the clergy to "declericalize" theology by pushing it out into the world through the hands and feet of laypeople. People in our churches have opportunity and insight in the marketplace, the academy, the home,

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[201] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 82.

[202] Keller, *How to Reach the West Again*, 49.

and the community that the professional clergy will never have.[203] A church or church plant will be more effective at reaching non-Christian and unchurched people when it is comprehensively aimed at the upper right portion of the framework. Warren, who also cited the Great Commandment and Great Commission as crucial to the thriving of the church he planted, identified that the purposes of the church must be conveyed in a way "that encourages the participation by every member… The mission must be stated in a way that everyone can not only *believe* in it — they can *participate* in it."[204]

3.3.2. "Up and to the Right" and "First Principles"

"Up and to the right" is a catchphrase in business jargon to indicate growth — chasing after a (usually elusive) linear fiscal path.[205] For a church, with this framework in mind, the expression "up and to the right" can take on the new and better significance of working to reach people in the community who are not yet connected to a church. As seen in the typologies above, this means orienting a church's ministries, events, outreaches, services, personnel, and resources in the direction of the upper right quadrant: *organic mission.* As seen in the typologies above, this is not abandoning ecclesial theological and institutional strengths but harnessing those strengths and applying them with determined outward intentionality. A church or church plant that is effective in reaching people outside of its walls, leverages the strength of the institution and the laity's relationship to God to fuel outreach through its people to the broader community. In this

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[203] See a similar exhortation from a Catholic perspective in Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cardinal Marc Ouellet President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America," n.d., accessed September 4, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html where Pope Francis says, "Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness..."

[204] Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 108. Italics mine.

[205] Jeff Richards, "Success, Reality and the Myth of 'Up and to the Right,'" *TechCrunch*, March 8, 2014, https://techcrunch.com/2014/03/08/success-reality-and-the-myth-of-up-and-to-the-right/.

way, church members begin to meet the community where it is. With a firm grasp on fundamental reality that is proclaimed in the *Shema,* on Jesus's commissioning of his followers, and on the comprehensive nature of *eklesia,* a church plant or church can push "up and to the right," confident that it is working to fulfill its mission in the world. Institutional church practice (doctrine and liturgy) pushes *up* into organic church practice (mission in the world). Great Commandment (hearing and loving God) pushes *out* toward Great Commission (going and making disciples). Churches like the ones in the typologies above persistently aim their efforts in this way — what our three interlocutors might call *incarnational mission* (see Figure 3.8).

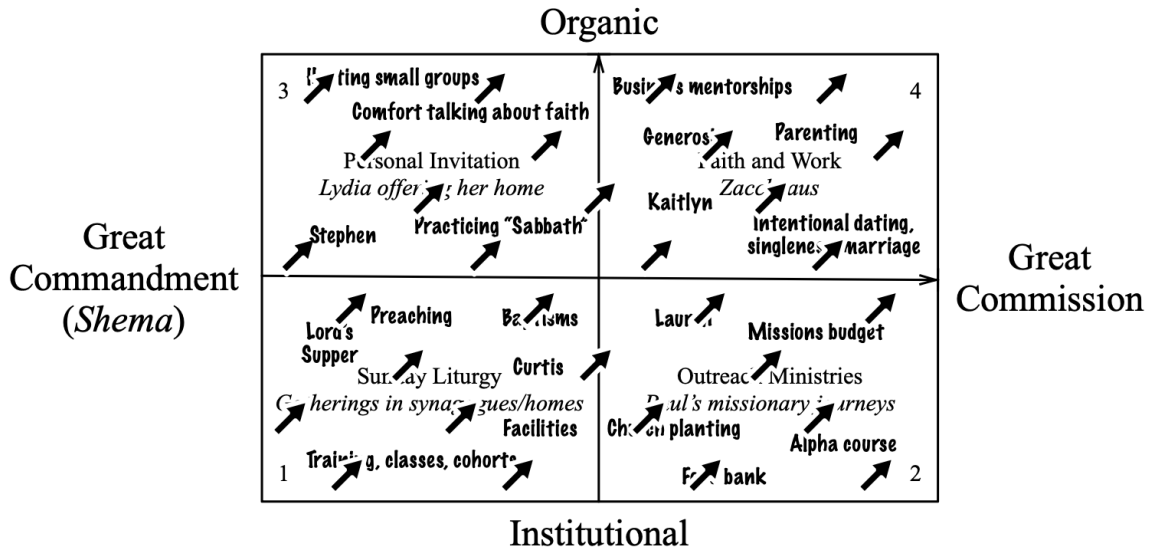

Figure 3.8

Hirsch's, Keller's, and Stetzer's various cautions against over-institutionalization are because it results in the gradual, inexorable pull to the bottom left of the framework. Their warnings are another way of advocating for shifting the center of gravity toward the upper right. Figure 3.8 illustrates the end goal: all of a church's resources working in one concerted direction: incarnational mission. A simple assessment of where the activities, personnel, and budget of a church reside in the framework is an important step in a church's self-understanding. However, to

work toward becoming the kind of church that effectively reaches the non-Christian and unchurched people in its community, more than assessment is required. The infusion of evangelism, innovation, and contextualization into the people, words, and deeds of a church moves the center of gravity. It is this infusion that will shape a church into a community that is more effective at understanding, reaching out to, and drawing in the unchurched.

In practice, this means taking an important step beyond assessment of *what* a church is doing, by also asking *how* it can infuse as many of its ministries as possible with the three emphasis areas identified in Part 2: evangelism, innovation, and contextualization. As explored above through Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer, evangelism means carefully considering the non-Christian. Innovation means trying something new, adjusting, and trying something new again. Contextualization means consistently saying and doing things that are comprehensible to the outsider. In one of the typologies above, for example, the church in Mexico City successfully organized baptism classes. However, it was not until it began equipping, measuring, and celebrating its congregants' evangelistic activity that it truly became an evangelizing church. Likewise, a church might have any number of stable programs. However, it is only when a church injects evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance into each of those programs it is positioned to consistently engage non-Christian and unchurched people. Warren notes that churches and church plants should be less concerned about programming and more concerned about processing people into the church's mission.[206] As the typologies above show, there are innumerable examples of how this infusion might be accomplished across a church's various resources and activities.

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[206] Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 108.

Enumerating and situating a church's activity and resources within the framework provides a bird's eye view to begin intentionally innovating toward evangelism and contextualization. Aristotle's "first principles" thinking has in recent years taken hold in business practice, helping leaders to rethink how they might solve a problem.[207] Applying first principles thinking in the life of a church means refusing to accept inherited ministry forms as fixed and instead reasoning from irreducible truths. In standard usage, "first principles" are the most basic and most important reasons for doing or believing something. The "first principle" of the good news about Jesus Christ — that forgiveness from and reconciliation to God is possible — can help to motivate a church into the "first principle" actions. One example of first principles thinking in the church comes from Archbishop William Temple who once remarked that "the Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it."[208] What is true for those presently outside of the church is also true for every believing congregant and every believing clergyperson; they too were also once outside the church. "First principle" thinking, therefore, results in innovation for evangelistic focus and contextual resonance.

3.3.3. Innovating Toward Evangelistic Impulse and Contextual Resonance

Church leadership can start with the assessment personnel, resources, and activities identified in each of the four quadrants of the framework. Focusing on one quadrant at a time, they can ask three questions for the church's ministries identified there:

1. "How can this event/person/practice/resource make understandable the person of Jesus and the mission of the church to someone who is new to or unfamiliar with our church or with Christianity?"

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[207] Shane Parrish, "What Is First Principles Thinking?," *Farnam Street*, April 9, 2018, https://fs.blog/first-principles/.

[208] Alan Guiana, "Letter from the West Indies," *Theology* 59, no. 432 (June 1956): 242, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X5605943205.

2. "Is there something new to try here, or something old that can be eliminated?"
3. "How can this event/person/practice/resource better *relate* to someone who is new to or unfamiliar with our church or Christianity?" Or put differently, "How can we show a new person that the Christian story offers answers to their most difficult questions and/or satisfaction to their deepest longings?"

These three questions (as well as above typologies above) will provide helpful starters for *new* infusion of *contextualized evangelism* to be present comprehensively throughout a church's practice, ministries, and initiatives. These questions help to "broaden [the] focus beyond just the people in the room, the players most directly involved," and to take into "account the people outside the room" as well.[209] The church that is effective at reaching non-Christian and unchurched people will be a church that does not stop with considering the church insiders. They will also consider, in as much of the ministry as possible, the person in the community who does not yet know or believe gospel message.

Asking these questions can result in innovation toward evangelistic impulse and contextual resonance across a church's ministries. Below is a table that places many common church resources and activity into the framework and provides examples actions to innovate in these areas (Table 1).

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[209] Ronald Heifetz and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 94, http://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE004177777.

Table 1

Area or Practice	Innovating toward evangelistic impulse	Innovating toward contextual resonance
Quadrant 1: Institutional / Great Commandment		
Sermon	Create regular feedback loop with non-Christians and new Christians to help craft sermons. Shape applications that speak directly to non-believers as well as believers.	Use idioms drawn from the city's shared life and culture. Show how the gospel answers "questions that people actually have."[210] Use illustrations from individuals who represent the kinds of people who are in the area.
Liturgy	Choose worship moments that narrate the gospel storyline explicitly. Provide one-sentence explanations or definitions from stage or in print, e.g. "When we sing 'hallelujah' it means 'praise the Lord.'"	Commission local artists or poets to interpret liturgical elements visually or auditorily. Integrate culturally familiar art forms or local music styles.
Baptism	During baptismal moments, show how baptism and Jesus's Great Commission are connected. Do count baptisms and conversions in the church, but do not *only* count those. Also count and celebrate those baptisms when a layperson was instrumental in the process.	Connect following Jesus with the broader church community by marking moments of baptism in church services with personal story from the newly believing person *and* from those in the community who prayed for, listened to, and spoke with the new believer.
Lord's Supper	Utilize regular practice of the Lord's Supper to highlight the fundamental person and work of Jesus. This way the gospel message is in front of the church people regardless of the theme or scripture of study. Many churches "fence the table," explicitly stating how the practice of the Lord's Supper is for communion of followers of Christ.	Connect "bread and wine" with contemporary necessities to show that Jesus was saying (among other things) that his bodily sacrifice provided what everyone needs to live — now and forever.

[210] Jordan Rice, "Don't Waste Your Preaching," May 21, 2018, Interview, https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/dont-waste-your-preaching-an-interview-with-jordan-rice?rq=Jordan%20rice.

Quadrant 2: Institutional / Great Commission		
Classes	Move "Alpha" or other classes designed for non-Christians to a neutral site like a conference room at coffee shop or library. Communicate across classes that being a part of a church also means being a part of the *missio dei* to reach others.	Ask questions first in order to address non-Christians on their own terms. Take care to speak to non-Christians rather than about them, especially in classes where most attendees are believers.
Missions and Outreach	Explicitly link acts of service to opportunities for gospel conversation and prayer.	Partner with civic groups for recurring service projects.
Volunteer Development	Wherever possible, create volunteer opportunities for people who are still undecided about Christian faith.	Integrate key volunteers into more than Sunday service roles. Normalize their presence and feedback in meetings and planning.
Quadrant 3: Organic / Great Commandment		
Welcome and Invitation	Model invitation and welcome language that is explicitly about Jesus's invitation over above invitation to a church event.	Equip a variety of "first impressions" hosts who are capable interpersonally and who demographically represent the community the church is serving.
Care Ministries	Equip after sermon caregivers with accessible ways to pray for those who come forward for help.	Offer counseling partnerships with community clinics and Christian therapists.
Small Groups in Homes	Make groups attractive and understandable to outsiders. For example, pilot eight to ten week "meet-ups" around local interests and causes instead of or in addition to permanent groups. Equip hosts to share personal faith stories naturally within group rhythms.	Note how people gather and what people do outside of work and school in the context. Shape groups to be familiar to people who connect in these ways. Take advantage of the local area to create place for small group community. E.g., local parks, hiking trails, lake or beach, theater, etc.
Quadrant 4: Organic / Great Commission		
Faith and Work	Celebrate stories of congregants practicing their faith in the workplace, be it through integrity initiatives, lunchtime bible reading, shaping pay policy, or innumerable other ways.	Church leadership should study and familiarize themselves on the main industries and jobs in their cities and neighborhoods, and they should refresh this knowledge periodically.

Money and Generosity	Consistently use passages like Matthew 6:21 to show that Jesus "cares about your money because he cares about your heart." Tell stories of how giving directly advances gospel mission, connecting not only to the church's missions, outreach, and church planting efforts.	Tell stories of how giving directly advances gospel mission, connecting to stories that highlighting the generosity of everyday people in everyday places.
Public Witness	Consistently disarming and winsomely addressing non-Christians throughout the work of the church provides a model for people to emulate in their everyday lives with unchurched colleagues, friends, and family. This modeling also shows that responsibility is to listen and communicate understandably, not to convince or coerce.	Use a lunch or dinner to gather church members who are community and business leaders for mutual encouragement: to pray for them and to share stories of how their faith impacts their work.

These and innumerable other implementations of church ministries give careful consideration to the outsider. Perhaps counterintuitively, this consideration for the outsider also serves people *inside* the church. First, perhaps more than many church leaders realize, those within a congregation share many questions with people in the broader culture.[211] Furthermore, "approach[ing] a text first seeking Biblical truth and a commitment to what God has revealed to us in scripture; then, answering the questions that people actually are asking in this present time"[212] serves as a training ground for those Christians who are present. Week in and week out, a comprehensive gospel is shared — one that is for churched people and for unchurched people. Church insiders not only receive a diet of Bible for Christian life; they are also equipped with Biblical answers to questions their friends and family raise. Finally, because unbelievers are addressed with the same kind of love and respect as believers every week, parishioners begin to think of this a safe place to bring friends, family, and coworkers regardless of faith background.

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[211] See, for example, the Barna study cited here: J.D. Greear, "Christianity Isn't Cussing Less and Giving More," *JD Greear Ministries*, March 18, 2019, https://jdgreear.com/cussing-less-giving-more/.

[212] Rice, "Don't Waste Your Preaching."

Over time, people who might have never attended before will discover this is also a community for them. It is critical to understand that these two aspects of a church's life and ministry are not in opposition. Instead, one motivates and fuels the other. A congregation dedicated to people *following* Jesus can (and should) also be a community where people can *find* Jesus.

3.3.4. Fostering a Culture

Even the simplest of the examples given above require a degree of evangelistic impulse (presenting the gospel as the answer for people who don't yet believe), innovation (trying something new), and contextual resonance (working to make a church's words and actions *essentially understandable* by those inside and outside the congregation). Each of these examples also begins with the action of a church as institution: they are driven by pastors and staff people. When, as a matter of course, church leadership infuses its words and methods with evangelism, innovation, and contextualization, it makes a church newly accessible by unbelievers in the larger community. However, this is not the most potent outcome. Hirsch describes a new *culture* that can take hold in churches: one of outward movement that permeates the whole church body, not only the official church personnel and capacities.[213] What Hirsch says that this richness of church culture is "appropriately comprehensive category by which to assess, understand, develop, and evaluate the biblical ministry of the church."[214] This idea is echoed by Heifetz's stakeholder "outside the room."[215] This is more than strategy-making; it is culture-building.

Over time, when a church member consistently encounters church actions which give careful consideration for the outsider, she begins to think of this community as a safe place to

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[213] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 281–82.

[214] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 30.

[215] Heifetz and Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 94.

invite outsiders into. Over time, when a church member consistently encounters church messages which give careful consideration for the outsider, he begins to practice the same kind of listening and speaking to non-Christians in his own life. This is the product not of merely changing superficial Sunday morning production, nor of "dumbing down" central Christian theology. This means fostering an *innovative* kind of culture: one that is lovingly and *evangelistically focused* on the unbeliever and seeks to communicate in a *contextually resonant* way. As a lifelong preacher, Keller elaborates on this as it relates to the sermon. He says,

> Preaching is compelling to young secular adults not if preachers use video clips from their favorite movies and dress informally and sound sophisticated, but if the preachers understand their hearts and culture so well that listeners feel the force of the sermon's reasoning, even if in the end they don't agree with it.[216]

In other words, a church need not abandon one audience or the other to be effective, because the same gospel is for the Christian as it is for the non-Christian. The same gospel will affirm and challenge both audiences in different ways, and a church with a culture of evangelism, innovation, and contextualization will take advantage of this fact.

As addressed earlier in this study, all three thought leaders are keenly aware of watered-down theological syncretism. Likewise, they each — especially Hirsch — speak forcefully against the consumerism that has taken hold in too many church environments. Thinking critically about all of a church's activities and resources through the lenses of evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance does not water-down; it builds up. A *culture* of intentional Christian cultural engagement guards a church from both insularism and syncretism. Fostering a culture where people hear and believe the Good News so thoroughly that they are driven to out into the world for the sake of others is a formidable defense against both losing contextual resonance and against losing gospel relevance.

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[216] Keller, *Center Church*, 15.

3.3.5. Applying the Framework Conclusion

Not all church plants are successful at reaching non-Christians. Not all established churches are ineffective at reaching non-Christians. However, as outlined in Part 1 of this thesis, statistically speaking church plants are generally better at conversing with and drawing in unchurched people. In other words, church plants, on average, are oriented "up" and "out" on the framework. In fact, they are often *more* concerned with the people outside of the room than those who regularly attend.[217] As demonstrated above, they do this by shifting to an evangelistic focus, an entrepreneurial innovation, and a contextual resonance. Their leadership works to create and foster a culture where this concern is also adopted by the laity. It is the thesis of this study that church plantings' effectiveness with unchurched people can be enjoyed by established churches as well.

[217] Heifetz and Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 94. Cf. Jesus's parables in Luke 15.

4. Conclusion

I believe this framework to be sufficiently broad to be applicable to a wide range of different churches across sizes, expressions, and contexts. I also think it is sufficiently narrow to provide practical guidance for church leaders to begin to innovate toward evangelistic impulse and contextual resonance. However, no framework is enough. There are other tools, research, and practical guidance that is also aiding churches in this present era. Most importantly, churches — old and new — belong most of all to God. Even as they position themselves to be more effective with a growing number of people who do not yet know Jesus or the good news about him, churches are *God's* project in the world. This framework is nothing apart from his Spirit, his counsel, and his conviction.

4.1. Limitations and Recommendations

One of the greatest limiters of this study is the sporadic data collected on churches' ability to engage non-Christians. A single study about church plants' effectiveness with non-Christian and unchurched people has been cited repeatedly across numerous documents.[218] Without ongoing research in this area, discerning the efficacy of plants and established churches among non-Christians means reviewing baptisms as a proportion of attendees or comparing them from one group of churches to another. Building on the 2015 study, an ongoing study of Protestant church evangelism would greatly benefit churches everywhere by unearthing other insights previously unrecognized. Beyond essential church identification data (e.g. name, place, and age) research questions should ask about average weekly attendance, what percentage of weekly attenders had not previously attended another church in the last X period, and the annual

[218] Green, "New Churches Draw Those Who Previously Didn't Attend."

number of baptisms or conversions. Undoubtedly, experienced researchers are capable of crafting concise questions to elicit these figures. Academicians and practitioners would benefit from identifying commonalities (like this thesis has done with church planting, for example) among churches which have higher percentages of new people to the faith.

The focus here has been on Protestant churches in the West broadly, and within in the United States specifically. Another recommendation is for this kind of a study to be made of other denominations or in other parts of the world. This is but one thesis, focused on only the church planting initiatives of one (admittedly broad) group of churches, in one part of the world, primarily from the perspective of three leaders over the past three decades. More studies from more and varied groups would be beneficial to compare and contrast data and experiences. Furthermore, the trends and trajectories built upon in this study might change, and another group or region may have already navigated those changes. For example, there is some emerging evidence that for the first time in decades, the decline in churchgoing and belief is slowing,[219] and there is new research that points to the openness of unchurched people to conversations of faith.[220]

Another recommendation is in the area of theological development. Perhaps the framework above can offer a starting point for further research and a robust, coherent ecclesiology of church planting, or an ecclesiology of evangelism. Like any systematic theology, an ecclesiology like this would provide a scaffolding for conversation among established church and church planting leaders, as well as education for new pastors or prospective church planters.

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[219] Smith et al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off."

[220] Rick Richardson, *You Found Me: New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith* (US: IVP, 2023).

Working toward an ecclesiology of church planting would add to fruitful conversation toward more and better church planting in the West and beyond.

There is also opportunity for even better partnerships between church planters and established church leaders. Already, church plants receive much from established churches. The past two or three decades have seen a notable increase in identifying, funding, and training for the purpose of starting new churches. This is expressed in many ways: numerous church planting networks have emerged,[221] church planting conferences have grown,[222] and church planting assessment and training has developed. Virtually all of this has been catalyzed and supported by established churches. There is, however, an opportunity for more partnership moving in the other direction: from church plants toward established churches. One executive pastor at a large church in Texas noted that it was not until after they began supporting church plants that they discovered they had a lot to *receive* from the field of church planting as well as to give. The work of tiny startups began to shape the ways a giant church approached its context.[223] Now this church not only contributes prayer, leadership insight, and financial backing *to* church planters, they also create opportunities to learn *from* them. I believe that there is ample opportunity for this kind of two-way partnership to benefit both church plants and established churches.

4.2. The Existential Reality

When I moved to Mexico City in my early twenties to serve as a youth minister in a Mexican-led church plant, I quickly became overwhelmed. Like any leader in a church planting work, I found myself buried under the vast amount of learning required to adequately understand

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[221] Anita K. Palmer, "Special Report: The State of Church Planting Today," *Outreach Magazine*, July 14, 2016, https://outreachmagazine.com/features/18417-state-of-church-planting-today.html.

[222] "Events - Exponential," Conference, Exponential, accessed May 2, 2025, https://exponential.org/exponential-events/.

[223] *75 Years*.

and engage my context. For me, this was compounded by the need to learn a new language. Having grown up in Texas, I was like many people I knew: I had dabbled in Spanish-learning but had never really committed to the practice necessary to become conversant. For more than a year, I had plans to move to another country and serve in a church plant there, yet I still put off language learning. Subconsciously I reasoned to myself that it would "come together" later once I lived in Latin America. However, plunging into to south central Mexico City disabused me of such a casual approach to learning another language. There was no miracle app and no simple "picking up" of the language. Instead, it required grindingly hard work. It required trying and failing and trying again — and again. Before my life started in the Mexico City, language learning had been easy to put off, set aside, or even romanticize. Later, on the ground and saturated in a new culture, it was clear that I had to take a different tack. Before moving, knowing another language felt like a "nice to have." In Mexico City, knowing the language became existential. I would not survive without it. There were only two options: learn the language or retreat. It was a matter of survival.

Having personally served on four church plant teams, chaired new church plant boards in five countries, and fundraised for church plants in dozens of cities, I have come to believe that part of a church plant's relative success with reaching unchurched people is like my language learning journey. For a church plant, knowing and resonating with people in the local community is existential. The church plant simply will not survive without it. For most church planting ventures, there are only two options: know and resonate with local people or retreat. It is a matter of survival.

Established churches, whether they are twenty or one hundred years-old, are almost always the result of the faithful church planting of previous generations. However, too often a church's evangelistic impulse and contextual resonance remain static in what was effective during

an earlier time. Entrepreneurial innovation gives way to inertia. Over time, this means a church can find itself very skillful at speaking and acting in ways that resonate internally, but which are foreign or even off-putting externally. This is a tangible example of what Hirsch means when he calls for recovering a latent church's missional-apostolic DNA.[224] It is there; most churches, especially of the American Protestant variety, were founded because of it. Effective church plants "don't return to a romanticized past, but they incarnate the gospel in a biblical present," Stetzer observes. In contrast, too many established churches hold "on to personal traditions, rituals, and preferences… [and] prevent themselves from sound, biblical, and *missional contextualization*."[225]

Connecting with and drawing in people is existential for a bootstrapped start-up like a church plant because in a matter of mere weeks or months, the plant will not survive without local engagement. While the timeframe is different, the hard truth is the same is also true for established churches. The difference in timeline — drawn out over years and decades — can mask the reality, but without connecting with and drawing in non-Christian and unchurched people, an established church will also not survive. Without concerted, strategic emphasis on those people who are not yet a part of the congregation, even stable churches are just one step away from stasis and then decline. One might argue that church is for believers, not for non-believers,[226] but as I have shown through Hirsch, Keller, and Stetzer, the Protestant church planting movement of the last few decades strongly argues for "missional" churches that reach out into their communities to engage new people. Furthermore, the existential consequences of failing to do so clearly reveals intended missional nature of the church.

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[224] Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 340.

[225] Stetzer and Im, *Planting Missional Churches*, 33. Italics mine.

[226] Barry Cooper, "Five Reasons We Don't Disciple," *9Marks*, August 22, 2014, https://www.9marks.org/article/five-reasons-we-dont-disciple-part-2/.

4.3. Conclusion

In Part 1 of this thesis, I identified two data points which have persisted at least over the past two or three decades. First, there is the one that Christian leaders everywhere are familiar with: the secular decline in church-going and Christian belief. Second, there is the fact that, overall, statistically church plants are better at reaching new people — those who are not yet part of any church — than are established churches. These two trends provoke this study's thesis question: can established churches adapt some practices or mindsets from the field of church planting in order to become more effective at reaching non-Christian and unchurched people in their communities?

In Part 2, I introduced three primary interlocutors: Alan Hirsch, Timothy Keller, and Ed Stetzer. Each has been a seminal voice in protestant church planting in the West over the past two decades. While they have much in common, they each also come to the subject from different stations: Hirsch as a former church planter and a philosopher/theologian; Keller as a church planter, pastor, and preacher; and Ed Stetzer as a former church planter and a current academician. While I surveyed writings and talks from across their careers, three primary texts are explored in this study because they represent the most explicit long-form engagement of church planting from each thought leader: "The Forgotten Ways" by Hirsch, "Center Church" by Keller, and "Missional Church Planting" by Stetzer. Rather than giving a summary each interlocutor's overall contributions to the church planting field, Part 2 excavates specifically what these three thought leaders have in common as it relates to church plants' reaching non-Christian and unchurched people. Through this exploration, three primary areas were identified: evangelistic impulse (concern for the outsider), entrepreneurial innovation (readiness to try new things), and contextual resonance (ability relate well with non-Christians).

In Part 3, I began the application of Part 2's findings by developing a cohesive framework. The framework is built upon two ecclesial spectrums: the Great Commandment/Great Commission and institutional church/organic church. Using these horizontal and vertical spans to create a grid, church leaders can first assess the varied ministries of his or her church and then design how to inject the values identified in Part 2 into everything the church does. This framework can be utilized by churches and church plants alike. This practice helps to move the center of gravity upward and outward. It is most concerned with innovating a culture of evangelism and contextualization that pervades the life of a local congregation. In this way, while an established church is inevitably different from a new church plant, it can still imbue the same church plant values of knowing, understanding, and effectively engaging its broader context.

Can established churches adapt church planting values or practices to better reach their communities, especially those people who are non-Christian or unchurched? Yes! It is possible by organizing a church's practice of the Great Commandment (doctrine and liturgy) and Great Commission (mission and outreach) both institutionally (clergy) and organically (laity) around the values of evangelistic impulse, entrepreneurial innovation, and contextual resonance.

Finally, I conclude with a benediction adapted from a prayer by one of the first church planters:[227]

> Church leader, may your love for the unchurched abound more and more in knowledge and in depth of understanding,
>
> May you be able to discern what is best for them, for the local church, and for the local community,
>
> May the church you serve be an instrument in overturning old, corrupt ways and bringing about new, flourishing ways,
>
> May this be true in the church you serve both now and for generations to come, until Jesus returns,

[227] Cf. Philippians 1:9-11

May your ministry be overflowing with fruitfulness, edifying the believer, and drawing the unbeliever to belief,

May it be so, through and for Jesus Christ. His name be glorified forever. Amen.

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