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**5 Dangers that can Wreck Church Plants (and Planters)**

**July 25, 2019 – Phil A. Newton**

Don’t plant a church unless you take seriously the dangers that lurk.

Why immediately bring up dangers when we need new churches? Quite simply, we’re all grieved over church planters failing—not at planting, but at living holy lives, and thus faltering at [finishing well](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publication/faithful-endurance/) and honoring Christ above all.

The same dangers may appear in any pastorate, of course, yet they tend to heighten with church planters who have their own swagger, code language, and unique camaraderie. They’ve been in the trenches of starting a new work, gathering a group to join them, and pulling together enough details to get the church off the ground and running. That’s great—and dangerous—work.

To do it well, we need each other to encourage, exhort, and hold us accountable in the work of ministry. Church planters must remain sensitive to five dangers that can topple their work and wreck their lives.

### 1. Pride

The sermon that everyone compliments, the mission effort that soars, the counseling session that heals, and the vision-casting that motivates: these things are wonderfully helpful in ministry, but can morph into objects of pride. Is the solution to preach poor sermons, offer halfhearted missions, or remain visionless? Certainly not. But we must be conscious that we live in the grace of God. If we succeed in a sermon or counseling session, it’s because God blessed it. Scripture is full of warnings against pride:

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. ([Prov. 16:18](https://www.esv.org/verses/Prov.%2016%3A18/))

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. ([James 4:6](https://www.esv.org/verses/James%204%3A6/))

The aura surrounding church planters makes them especially vulnerable to the deceitful ways of pride, which claws and battles for glory. So we must remember that however well we do, “we are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty” ([Luke 17:10](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2017%3A10/)).

**Pride has no safe place to grow where the cross looms large.**

We can only battle pride with the cross in view. Live in the consciousness that your sins are so staggering that it took the sacrifice of God’s Son to atone for them. Pride has no safe place to grow where the cross looms large.

### 2. Power

When I planted the church I pastor 32 years ago, I made lots of mistakes. One of the biggest resulted from too much power residing in me. We began with no polity, no body of elders, and no formalized decision-making process. When something needed to be done or a decision needed to be made, I exercised my authority to do it. I sometimes joked that everything about our church lived between my ears. Unfortunately, it did.

With power comes the temptation to think you can do whatever you want, whenever you want, however you want. You get the mistaken notion that the church exists to serve you and your whims. That’s a short road to disaster.

How unlike Jesus, in whom all power resided, to hold power for selfish purposes: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” ([Mark 10:45](https://www.esv.org/verses/Mark%2010%3A45/)). Peter reminds elders that we’re to exercise oversight “not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” ([1 Pet. 5:2–3](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Pet.%205%3A2%E2%80%933/)).

A [plurality](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-plant-embrace-plural-leadership/) of godly elders checks the tendency to let power go to our heads. This means, as lead pastors, we listen to our fellow elders, submit to their collective wisdom, and humbly serve with them as those God has appointed to shepherd his church.

### 3. Lack of Accountability

Too much power breeds too little accountability. When there’s no framework of accountability, leadership decisions fail to pass through the grid of godly plurality that sees both our motives and the outcome of our actions. We’re living an unguarded life. We’ve read the news reports. Too many men, gifted and used by God, think they’re not vulnerable to crashing. They have accountability in name only. A fall awaits.

Why do we assume we don’t need serious accountability? Two reasons: we think too little of our propensity to sin, and we think too much of our ability to resist. We get the idea that as church planters we’ve achieved something grand in Christendom, so we’re not vulnerable to the same entrapments wrecking the other guys.

But that’s a satanic ruse. We’re sinners through and through. We stand by the grace alone. We need every person God would put into our lives to help us walk faithfully as Christians and lead effectively as pastors. Regular accountability—face-to-face and honestly vulnerable in the pursuit of holiness—checks the tendencies to slip.

### 4. Idealism

What happens when an aspiring church planter takes seminary courses on church planting (CP), reads the heavy-hitters in the CP world, and gets inspired by CP conferences? Idealism creeps in. It’s natural. I remember it so well.

It goes like this: “If I do A, B, and C, like so-and-so proposes, then I can expect X, Y, and Z results.” He’s heard the success stories but not enough struggle stories and failure stories. He thinks he knows his stuff. And maybe from an X’s and O’s standpoint, he’s pretty knowledgeable. But [church planting is pastoral work](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/alpha-male-plant-church/). If he hasn’t walked in that world, and heads with much idealism to plant a church, he may have some unfortunate surprises.

I recall one gifted young man who got inspired in seminary to plant a church. He graduated and headed to a population hotspot with all the idealism one could muster. He planted the church, but almost planted himself in a grave. He burned out. Had he been tempered in a local church for a reasonable period before planting, he might’ve removed a few idealisms from his CP toolbox and continued in the work.

That’s one reason Jesus gradually turned the disciples loose in ministry. Paul followed the same pattern. We read about the sending of the twelve ([Luke 9](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%209/)) and the seventy ([Luke 10](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2010/)). When the seventy came back all pumped about their authority over demons, Jesus quelled their world-conquering aspirations. Here’s what you need to get excited about, he told them: not “that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” ([Luke 10:20](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2010%3A20/)). Idealism checked.

### 5. Busyness

Ministry is consuming, and church planting often gobbles more than normal due to starting everything from scratch. The church planter has to organize, plan, find locations, set up, clean up, prepare, preach, counsel, visit, lead, and more until he drops. But that’s the normal routine for church planting (and much pastoral work).

He may not have a solid team around him. He has new people wanting to talk with him. He spends time doing community visits and contacts. He’s not accustomed to the preparation that goes into Sundays, so he’s strained every week. If he could physically do it, no doubt, he could spend 24 hours per day in church work.

But then, he’d be sinning against his Lord, his family, his church, and his body. God made us, just like the seasons, to function with rhythm ([Mark 2:27](https://www.esv.org/verses/Mark%202%3A27/)). What if the church planter makes those extra five visits but unravels his marriage? What if he organizes more meetings and leads more small groups, but all the while neglects his walk with Christ? What if he sips coffee with 10 potential attendees, but fails to shepherd the flock? What if he attends all the conferences and meetings he thinks everyone expects him to, but shrinks in his development as a man of God?

Church planter, expect to work hard, long hours. But if you build the church on your energy, it’s on a shaky foundation. Work hard and be diligent, but always remember it’s the Lord’s work. Enlist others to do it; train others to multiply it; but guard your heart, your family, and your flock when planning your schedule.

You cannot do everything you want to do. So don’t sweat it. Instead, plan wisely, work smarter, and live each day in reliance on the grace of God to accomplish what only God can do.

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