

10-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Thiessen, D. (2023). Book Review: Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting by Peyton Jones. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 15(2), 63-66. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol15/iss2/6>

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Book Review

Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches

By Peyton Jones

Zondervan, 2021

443 pages

US\$34.99, Hardcover

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The genre of comprehensive church planting textbooks received a major offering in 2021 in the form of *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* by Peyton Jones. Jones has planted multiple churches himself, both in the U.S. and abroad. For the past 15 years, he has been training church planters, both for the North American Mission Board and for his own network, New Breed. Published by Zondervan Reflective and sponsored by Exponential Resources, *Church Plantology* weighs in at a substantial 443 pages (the author claims to have started with over 800 pages!) and includes a helpful bibliography along with scripture and subject indexes. Ed Stetzer, who along with Daniel Im is co-author of the standard church planting textbook *Planting Missional Churches*, provides the forward.

Jones' burden to write about church planting is driven by the paucity of what he calls level five churches, defined as "multiplying on multiple strands out to at least the fourth generation" (xv). True church plants, he asserts, have the goal of developing into a church planting network (403-

4) and are contrasted with church starts, where the goal is simply to start a church service (4). The book defines plantology as “the study of mission as modeled by Jesus and the apostles that results in church planting,” and involves “the overlap of biblical principles, best missionary experience and practice, and church history” (10). Twenty chapters cover the ten principles of plantology that the author finds practiced by the first Christians in Acts:

1. They planted churches instead of starting churches;
2. They modeled their ministry after Jesus’ apostolic model;
3. They rejected top-down leadership and embodied Christ on mission together;
4. They resisted stationary entrenchment and formed apostolic strike teams;
5. They forsook pragmatism but listened to God’s heart for the community;
6. They refused to enable solo performers, but rather chose to equip team mobilizers;
7. They shunned bravado in favor of the Spirit’s empowerment;
8. They didn’t compartmentalize evangelism but lived as those who are sent;
9. They sacrificed full funding for apostolically agile mobility; and,
10. They didn’t build upward but spread outward.

Church Plantology explores the biblical foundations for church planting and the various qualities necessary for the church planter, including gifting, calling, character, and health. The following are laid out in detail: Leadership development of the church planting team, the team’s function, its role in the implementation of the specific mission, and the team’s values and strategy. Outreach strategies are offered along with practical advice for fundraising and partnerships. Various mission models are explored, and the author’s specific vision for networks of rapid multiplication is articulated as the book closes. A brief conclusion is followed by an extensive church planting bibliography. The book also includes scripture and author indexes.

Church Plantology has many strengths. First, it seeks to be thoroughly biblical, examining the Apostle Paul’s mission strategy in detail and emphasizing a model of team leadership derived from Ephesians 4:11 “Now these are gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers” (NLT). The author also demonstrates a wide breadth of practical and theoretical knowledge of

church planting scholarship, referencing virtually every major book that has been published on the subject in recent years.

Third, the author wisely places a heavy emphasis on church planting teams. Three full sections of the book are focused on the development and deployment of church planting teams. Some knowledge regarding the APEST model (Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, Teachers), developed by Alan Hirsh, is assumed, because the model provides for a balanced team that can plant multiple healthy churches (87). Within this framework, the author identifies “Fist” teams that plant the church and stay as pastors and leaders, while “Strike” teams are immediately mobilized and sent out to plant new churches (127).

APEST teams also provide one of the three components for the development of missional direction and an eventual mission statement for the church. A combination of local needs evident in the community, the APEST drive that characterized the mix of spiritual gifts within the team, and divine opportunities to interact with the lost, come together to shape the unique missional strategy of each church plant (217). This process involves the whole church planting team, and practical advice for how the team can get to know the community is offered (232). APEST teams also shape the church services themselves, and the author offers examples of different kinds of service structures (267-268).

A fourth strength of the book is its clear view of the unique pressures and stresses that a church planter experiences. While the book certainly has a hopeful and even optimistic tone regarding church planting, Jones offers these sober words of caution to the aspiring church planter:

Planting a church is a long internal process of internal surrender. Planting serves as both the anvil upon which God hammers out the impurities of our good and wrong desires, and the crucible burning away the mixed motives of spirit and flesh. Planters take a beating in their bodies, and souls, their expectations dying a hundred deaths through blessed crucifixion. (279)

A final strength of the book is its missional focus. The author envisions the church planting simply seeking to serve the community during the first year in it and provides a long list of ideas for connecting with lost people, including recreational activities, intellectual pursuits, social causes, hospitality, and proximity spaces (323-3). This practical advice on how to implement and maintain mission is further facilitated by questions for reflection, questions for discussion, and challenges to take action at the end of each chapter, making the book an ideal tool for a church planting

team to read together and increasing the immediate applicability of the book's contents significantly.

One weakness of the book is that the author blames various church ills, without documentation, on the church growth movement. Church growth is fingered for encouraging the "church start" mentality instead of church plant mentality (6), and for the lack of concern regarding the health of church planters. Jones states hyperbolically, "During the church growth movement, America witnessed large ecclesiastical empires being built like pagan temples of old with the foundations being laid upon the sacrificial deaths of their firstborns" (109). The author further errs in describing Donald McGavran as the author of *Church Growth Principles* (one can only assume that he meant to say *Understanding Church Growth*) and in the next sentence, he suggests that those who "read Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church* and were inspired by it felt [that] they could grow beyond their means if they simply followed the formula" (270). This kind of faulty analysis of important historical figures in church planting and church growth also casts doubt as to the accuracy of the author's analysis in other areas.

A second challenge facing the readers is the books' somewhat frenetic and trying-too-hard-to-be-hip style. In his discussion of worship gatherings, for example, the author strains to fit references to improvisational music, *The Lion King*, Frank Gaebelein, and G. K. Chesterton all into one paragraph (262). In another place, one finds the phrase, "kick out my preaching jam" (419) which left this reader feeling old and puzzled.

A final weakness is one common to books attempting to be comprehensive: they tend to say too little about some subjects and too much about others. In the case of *Church Plantology* too much space is given to attempting a full-blown theology of spiritual gifts and too little is said about prayer.

But these critiques do not change the fact that overall, *Church Plantology* provides a vast goldmine of thoughtful and useful insight for all who are engaged in the work of church planting. Its biblical foundation and practical orientation make it an excellent resource that should quickly become required reading for today's church planters.