

Planting Safer Churches

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A. Introduction

This may seem like an unusual title. On the one hand, we would hope that churches are safe, loving and accepting places. This is where the Gospel is preached and where people whose lives are being changed come. On the other hand, can we really expect church to be safe? Isn't there something intensely dangerous about an encounter with the living God. Isn't church where our inner most vulnerabilities are laid bare?

1. Why planting safer churches matters

However, I want to suggest that this matters. It matters for church plants and that's the area where my focus is but it also matters when we are looking at renewal and revitalisation in established churches as well. It matters because whilst we talk about the dangerous side to Gospel encounters, we are using the language of danger in a very specific way. Yes, there is an exciting danger to meeting the living God but it's not meant to put us at risk from others.

It matters because whilst Christians and their leaders are usually well intentioned, there are dangers that arise. There are dangers that arise because predators look at churches and see opportunities. They recognise that churches are welcoming and loving places, they recognise that churches are places where vulnerable people congregate and they perceive that our desire for grace and compassion can result in naivety if we are not careful.

Paul in Acts 20:29-31 says:

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

It matters because although we gather as saved people, we also gather as saved sinners. We are still works in progress living in the now and the not yet. This means that we still err, we still sin. We still can do things that are hurtful and harmful to others.

This includes not just those areas of life where we are intentional or malicious. In fact, there has at times been a tendency among Christians to see things in those black and white terms. We think of sin and failure purely in terms of intent. However, we can end up doing and saying things, even when there is no intent to hurt or harm that end up being harmful. This is why Scripture talks in terms of both high handed (deliberate) sin and sins of wandering and ignorance.

Notice how the Anglican confession prior to communion reflects this:

we have sinned against you and against our neighbour, in what we have thought, in what we have said and done, through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.¹

There is a recognition there that sin includes thoughts, words and actions. There is a recognition too that sin includes deliberate intent, ignorance and weakness.

The third reason we need to be aware and alert is because our churches are full of people who are still carrying wounds and still works in progress. They are learning how to relate to others, to trust and to be trustworthy. Sometimes it is when we are wounded that we can risk responding in a way that wounds others.

¹ [Holy Communion Order One | The Church of England](#)

So, planting safer churches matters because we want these churches to be healthy places where people will come to faith in Christ, find healing, restoration and shelter and learn to grow in godliness together.

Questions for discussion/reflection

1. Why is it important to consider whether or not your church is healthy and safe?
2. In what ways would a new person find your church to be safe?
3. In what ways might a new person consider your church potentially dangerous?
4. How often does your leadership team stop to discuss whether or not your church is healthy and safe? Is this enough?

2. Keep a watch on your own heart

If we want to plant safer, healthier churches, then we need to start by looking at ourselves. When Paul gives his final charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he warns of wolves that will try to get in. However, even before that, he says:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God,^[2] which he obtained with his own blood.²

Notice three crucial aspects here. In reverse order, first the church is the Lord's. It is named as belonging to God and being bought with the blood of Jesus. Secondly, local churches are entrusted to us. It's the Holy Spirit who appoints you as an overseer. There is a high calling here. Incidentally, spot the Trinitarian theme here. God's church is bought by Christ and entrusted by the Spirit. Thirdly, the first focus of the under shepherd is to pay close attention to himself.

The health of the local church will reflect something of the leader's health. So, what are the dangers here. I think that we might highlight the following. First, there is the danger that I see the church as my church, that it belongs to me and must be loyal to me. I then start to see the church as serving my personal vision and mission. So, it is important to remind ourselves of the Gospel, that God is redeeming a people to himself and to see again my place and the place of our congregation in that great redemptive story.

Secondly, I can become complacent. I can think that because I serve in ministry, that I am above falling and failure. I can lose sight of where my own specific pressure points and temptations are. I need to be reminded that I too am a beneficiary of grace. I need to preach the Gospel to myself. When I read "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" the "all" includes me.

Thirdly I can be tempted to get my responsibility to the church out of perspective. This might mean that I lose a sense of the high calling and do less than I'm responsible for. Leaders can become jaded and so begin to think in terms of just putting in the hours rather than having a true, joyful sense of their whole of life calling to the flock. However, we can also take on more responsibility. I know that in my first pastorate, there came a point where I felt it was always on me to hold things together. If there were tensions between leaders, ministries and congregations, I would be the one going around on a Saturday trying to glue things back together before church on Sunday. One person commented that it seemed like I became the lightning conductor when there was trouble prompting another leader to respond "but if you've seen the damage done to lightning conductors from storms, you really don't want to be one yourself." I was in effect attempting to be the mediator. The thing is, that role is taken by Jesus and I shouldn't have tried to take it on. So, we need to remember that we are the under shepherds and there are things we simply cannot take on. We have a saviour, a chief shepherd who takes care of his church.

² Acts 20:28.

Fourthly, we do have a responsibility for our wider health. How is your physical health? What about your emotional well-being? Do you sleep well at night? Pastors are not meant to be superhuman and so you will experience suffering, sickness, the affects of aging etc and you may at times be afflicted with mental illness such as depression and anxiety. Take a regular check-up. Build in space for rest, recreation and family. Find ways to talk openly with fellow leaders about how you are doing.

Fifthly, I think that this keeping watch over ourselves is meant to be done collectively. By the way, this is important as we seek to listen well to one another. How do you respond to the heart cry of a fellow leader? Do you dismiss it, follow it unquestionably or bristle against it. We might find it helpful to stop and think/ask about where a response or comment is coming from. It may be coming from wise insight but it may also be affected by where the person is emotionally and spiritually. Incidentally, this doesn't mean that we discount things. Those comments arising out of deep pain and struggle are still relevant. Indeed, it's important that we learn to hear the cries and not just to assume that our fellow leaders are tough, resilient and able to just keep going. We'll come back to plurality and interdependence later.

Questions for discussion and reflection

(In a spirit of mutual accountability, I would encourage you to discuss these questions with other leaders)

1. What specific aspects of the Gospel do you need to be reminded of at the moment?
2. Where does your life fit in to the Gospel story?
3. In what ways are you showing signs of becoming possessive of your church?
4. Where are your danger areas? What temptations are you most prone to? What steps are you taking to guard against temptation?
5. How would you describe your current physical and mental health? Do you need any specific help/intervention in this area?

3. Watch out for wolves

This is the bit we don't really like to talk about because we don't like to be personal. But your church will face attacks from wolves. Paul makes it clear that not only might happen but that it will happen.

“after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them”³

Now, it is one thing when those “wolves” are people from outside of our particular tribe or even time, examples of historic heretics, specific cults and sects that come round knocking on doors. It's not too hard to confront and warn about such dangers. However, Paul says that some of these “fierce wolves” will come from among our own. This will include prominent, highly thought of, well loved platform speakers, pastors and writers from within your own particular movement or network. It may even include people from within your own church and in your own leadership team. This means that we must be ready to confront, warn about and remove from eldership and membership people that we once considered close friends.

One thing that saddened me a few years back was that when a prominent evangelical leader began to promote particular nasty false teaching, other prominent Christians prefaced their responses by insisting “of course I consider so-and-so a good friend.” They said these things even as the person attacked our saviour, the Gospel and their brothers and sisters. What statement did they make by clinging to their friendship with the wolf about their relationship to their brothers and sisters?

Now, one very specific way in which we guard against wolves is by being alert to false teaching. This means that we need to know our Bibles well, to know our theology well. Whilst not everyone has the time or money to go to Theological Seminary, I would encourage all elders to invest in some form of theological training. This might mean committing to studying books and issues together or it might mean that a group of churches club together to put on training for elders and other leaders.

However, as well as bringing in false teaching, wolves do damage by how they behave as well. In recent years, the big danger hasn't been from immediately obvious heterodox teaching (though I think this was a factor even in those cases. Rather, it has been about predators getting into positions of power and influence within churches and parachurch organisations then exploiting their position to abuse others – physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually – for their own personal gratification. Later we will talk specifically about how narcissistic bullies operate in order to both abuse and to fend off challenge and criticism. At this stage though I want to highlight both dangers of false teaching and abusive/sinful practice so that we can watch out for them.

So what can we do to protect the church against wolves? Well, one crucial thing is to keep going back to the standards required of elders and deacons. We should check that our leaders meet the criteria set out in Scripture. Have a look at 1 Timothy 3. Elders need to be able to teach. So we should first of all test them theologically, do they know the truth and can they communicate it. At the same time, Paul talks in terms of their character. Is their life marked by self-control, godly relationships, a good reputation and faithfulness? How are they with their wife, their children, their work colleagues, with money?

It is important to emphasise here that this is not just about passing a one off test in order to get the elder's badge. Rather, these characteristics should be true of your leaders as time goes by. If questions

³ Acts 20:29-30.

are raised about any of these matters then an elder should be required to step down and if they are checked out to be true then they should not continue in office. Now, there may be some areas in which we say that they've failed at a given time but there is a way back but we must also be ready for the possibility that in some situations the disqualification from office is permanent.

We guard against wolves by spotting early where problems might arise. We guard by appointing godly leaders who share a commitment to love, provide for and protect the flock.

Questions for discussion and reflection

1. What process do you follow when choosing new leaders?
2. How often do you teach your church members about what qualities and gifting to look for in leaders?
3. Have a look at the qualities and characteristics in 1 Timothy 3. How do you as an individual and as a team measure up?

4. Keep a particular look out for narcissistic bullies

When thinking about dangerous leaders, the potential false shepherds and even wolves that might sneak in, being alert to the dangers of narcissism may be helpful. Narcissists are people with an unhealthy inward focus on themselves. They believe that the world should or does revolve around them, their needs and their priorities. These are the kind of people who tend to disrupt the church family in harmful ways and their relationships with others risk becoming abusive.

Here are some things to watch out for.

1. Do they give the impression that they carry a sense of entitlement -that they are owed by the church, by society, by God?
2. Do they have a problematic relationship to truth? I don't just mean that are they guilty from time to time of the sin of lying -for which they repent. What I mean is that occasionally you meet a person who would struggle to recognise that they are not telling the truth. They've learnt to believe their own stories. They will deny things, they will blame others even when the evidence is set before them from multiple witnesses and in writing.
3. Do they set themselves and their families on a pedestal expecting preferential treatment?
4. Is there a tendency to over romanticise the good things that come their way? Yes we rejoice in answers to prayer but have they built a story of the miraculous around themselves?
5. And does that play out the other way. Do they struggle to recognise that day to day difficulties may simply be part and parcel of life or even a consequence of their own mistakes? Is every catastrophe proof of spiritual warfare, that they are being attacked because of their faithfulness?
6. How are they with money? Can they be trusted with it? Are they in the habit of frequently asking for money? Who do they go to for it? Constantly pestering vulnerable members of the congregation, especially widows for money should be a red flag.
7. How do they respond to criticism? Do they hear it. It's not just about their emotional reaction. Actually, some people can respond passionately, defending themselves and find the criticism hard in the heat of the moment but are then able to come back later and say "yes maybe you were right there." Others, even if they are polite and charming about it are simply unable to accept that they might have room to improve or might have been in the wrong. Those are the ones to watch out for.
8. Is there a tendency to surround themselves with supporters -a love of sycophancy? Do they need to be the hero of the situation? I'd particularly be alert to situations where they particularly seek to build a kind of "groupie" relationship with members of the opposite sex.
9. Do they need to be the last to be heard? Are they the one who controls the timing of decisions?
10. Does it seem like whenever they propose something that there is an implicit or even explicit criticism of the gifting and ability of others?

One of the things that you see in situations is the way in which the narcissist builds up protective walls around themselves in order to close off criticism, challenge and correction. The sad thing is that this often means that they fail to learn and grow. I've seen gifted people plateau because they didn't see the need to keep learning and listening. More seriously still they may close themselves off to God's work in their lives.

Now, there is a dual challenge for us here. First of all, we want to protect the church from the dangers that such people bring. However, secondly at the same time we want to see them rescued, restored and protected from the damage they might do to themselves. So, whilst I want to be careful not to

put them in a position of authority and responsibility in the life of the church, I don't want to give up on them pastorally. I will keep loving them, I'll keep seeking to disciple them with the Gospel.

Realistically though, we may have to accept, particularly in a small plant or revitalisation work that the most loving thing to do is not to keep attempting that Gospel discipleship within the church plant and so you may need to look at your interdependency with other churches.

Questions for discussion and Reflection

1. When you look through the list above, are there examples of "warning lights" that you can see in other wannabe leaders?
2. Can you see examples of those warning lights in terms of your own behaviour?

5. Appreciate the provisions of Common Grace

In Romans 13:1-5, Paul writes:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”

This is important teaching and something I'd encourage church leaders to slow down and pay attention to. It doesn't mean that civil authorities are perfect or godly. At the end of the Bible, we get the book of Revelation and that offers a different but not contradictory perspective showing up the beastly nature of worldly authorities under anti-Christ influence. Nor does it mean that we are to blindly obey our rulers. We know that we must obey God rather than man if our governments pressure us to break God's law.

However, I think that a lot of people are wary of the rules and regulations that govern much of our life because they miss out on an important concept -common grace. Common Grace means that God's providential care is seen beyond salvation and beyond God's people. He continues to provide things for the wellbeing and good of people generally. One of the ways we see that is in the rule of law. It is a terrible thing when that breaks down.

This is important because I have too often heard Christian leaders talking about things like safeguarding requirements, employment law, charity law, health and safety law etc as though these things are at best irritating inconveniences and at worst evil impositions intended to thwart the Gospel.

Healthy churches will take these things seriously. They'll appreciate employment law because it helps them to show love and care for employees -and for the employees to love the church. They will see their safe-guarding policy as an opportunity to glorify God and to show love to the most vulnerable members of the church family. A commitment to carefully following charity law shows a concern for transparency and accountability.

Also, I think that when people appreciate these aspects of common grace, it encourages a robust and ordered approach to decisions, systems and culture. One area in which churches get into trouble without maliciously intending harm is that they end up in a muddle over processes. This may mean one or more of the following:

- They have no policies and processes at all so they end up making things up as they go along.
- They have inadequate processes and policies that are not robust enough to deal with difficult situations
- They have policies and processes but because they are not on top of them, they end up attempting to use the wrong process for a specific situation.

This is where you end up with the heartache of people falling out. The system isn't there to bear the load. It's also sadly where a church ends up in a mess and tarnishes the reputation of the Gospel because of avoidable problems.

Questions for discussion and reflection

1. What policies and processes do your church have in place? When were these last reviewed internally/externally?
2. Do you have a church constitution? Again, when was this last reviewed? Who by?
3. Do you have people who can advise you on legal matters relating to charity law and employment law?

6. Pursue plurality and interdependence

I'm a firm believer in the importance of plural leadership. This should include a plurality of elders and a wider leadership team of godly men and women. The evidence for the need for plural elders is seen in Acts 20:17 where Paul meets with the elders (plural) of the Ephesian church. Then in Titus 1:5, Paul tasks Titus with appointing elders (plural) in each town. We also see a wide range of people from different backgrounds involved in Gospel ministry at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter 16).

Plurality means that responsibility is shared. It stops the church becoming dependent on a one-man band ministry. It also means that the church family get to relate to a variety of gifted leaders. This is important because it stops a situation where the church becomes a copycat clone of the one person. Plurality done properly should also encourage accountability between the leaders as well.

I also think it's important to encourage plurality in terms of churches working together and being accountable to each other. That each local church has its own team of elders and that decisions such as discipline (1 Corinthians 5) are placed with a specific congregation suggests that local churches should be autonomous or independent. I don't think that it is helpful to have churches reporting in to a presbytery or a bishop. That creates distanced bureaucratic levels of relationship. The local church may well also find itself reporting to someone who does not share their wholehearted commitment to the Gospel.

However, I don't think that those churches should be isolated. We should encourage interdependence. I think 1 Corinthians 14:36 encourages this type of thinking. We are not disconnected, we are connected to one another and there should be support, accountability and challenge that arises out of relationships developed between churches. Exactly how that interdependence looks may vary from context to context.

This mutuality should create contexts in which a church and its leadership can hear the input of wise people from outside the immediate congregation and this may well be crucial if a church is starting to slip either in terms of doctrine or practice. It also means that people who have concerns have someone to go to with them.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Does your church have a genuinely plural leadership team?
2. Are you able to identify potential future elders and leaders to join the team? What steps are you taking to identify, prepare and call those leaders?
3. Name three other churches that you would consider your church to be in an interdependent relationship with.

7. Have a plan for how you handle accusations

Churches are messy and vulnerable places where serious spiritual business is being done. We should not be surprised then that there will from time to time be accusations that come our way. Those may be accusations against other members of the church, past or present, partners in fellowship with the church, other leaders and if you are a pastor/planter then you are pretty much guaranteed to be accused at some point yourself of something.

It is important therefore that we have prepared in advance for how we will respond to accusations. And, the first thing we need to consider is our own general demeanour and attitude. A lot of the preparation work for this is in the previous 6 things we've talked about. However, I would also say at this point that the best approach is to recognise humbly that we are ourselves fallen and frail. We will make mistakes and we will sin. On the basis, I make it my aim to say up front that I know I'll get things wrong but I also seek to be quick to acknowledge when I get things wrong and to say sorry. I believe that "I'm sorry" and "I forgive" should be among the most dominant words in a healthy church culture. You see, this is only possible when we remember that we are justified by faith, so we don't have to put on a front of being perfect.

The second thing I think is important is that churches should have zero tolerance for gossip and slander. The Bible is clear that such behaviours are sinful and incompatible with fellowship within the body. If someone has a concern or allegation to raise, they should do so. They shouldn't whisper behind the backs of others. It is also important that when people hear such unverified conjecture that they don't then repeat it to others. This is itself a form of bullying and abuse because it brings hurt and harm to the subjects of gossip. Alongside this, I believe that the phrase "some people are saying..." and variants on that theme should be banned from our lips.

This does mean that we need a process for how to handle allegations. The Bible is clear on this. When someone has an accusation to bring, there should be at least two witnesses.⁴ Note, that this requirement is in fact for any accusation but it is re-emphasised by Paul when talking about accusations about an elder.⁵

Now, in some cases, it will not be as simple as to have a second witness. If the accusation for example is about abusive behaviour then the only witness may well be the victim. I think though that there are other forms of "evidence" that can act as second witnesses in a situation. For example, there may be details about the circumstances that corroborate things. At other times we need to be aware of how character history both in terms of accused and accuser provide corroborating evidence.

Whilst there may be occasions where a legalistic perspective may see only one witness when there appear to be multiple witnesses when in fact there is only one – the accuser. This is where rather than having people come forward independently, there is a sense that the witnesses are being coordinated.

The accusation should be properly investigated. If it is a criminal matter it should be referred to the police. It should not simply be dismissed and nor should the person accused be merely allowed to deny the allegations. We should treat them seriously. If the accusations are proved true then the person should be warned -and that should be public. There may also be a need for further action such as church discipline and certain matters will require people to stand down from leadership.

⁴ Deuteronomy 19:15.

⁵ 1 Timothy 5:19.

If the accusation is proved false, then that's a serious matter. If it was also proven to be malicious then that should become a matter of church discipline in regards to the false accuser. See what Deuteronomy 19:16-21 says about the malicious accuser:

¹⁶ If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, ¹⁷ then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. ¹⁸ The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil[□] from your midst. ²⁰ And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. ²¹ Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

In New Testament terms, this means that where someone was seeking to use malicious gossip to cause the trashing of another's reputation, remove someone from leadership or bring about church discipline that church discipline matches the intent. A minimal act of repentance and restitution will involve the person concerned going and correcting claims they've falsely made to anyone else.

It is important not to rush these things. Whilst our desire might be to get things resolved as quickly as possible and to avoid confrontation, it is more important that we get to a resolution which is in line with the truth and is loving to all he need love and care. These periods of time are never easy for leaders. Often as well your commitment to seeking the truth and maintaining confidentiality will mean that you aren't able to say as much as some would like. Sadly, there will be those who feel no need to be tied by such requirements and so will happily speculate.

Our aim when responding to accusations should be first of all to ensure that those who have been sinned against are protected and looked after. Secondly, we seek the honour of the Gospel. Thirdly our concern is for the restoration and reconciliation of those who have been in sin.

Questions for discussion and reflection

1. Is there anyone that you need to say sorry to?
2. Does your church in any way struggle with a gossip culture? What actions can you take to rectify this?
3. Do you know exactly how you would respond to an accusation against a church member?
4. Do you know exactly how you would respond to an accusation against a church leader?

B. Conclusion

I am passionate about seeing new churches planted and existing churches revitalised. I see so many parts of our towns and cities that are crying out for a meaningful Gospel witness. It is important though that we don't just get into the numbers game. It is crucial that these church plants are healthy. This does mean that it is right to talk in terms of safer churches, places where people will find hope in Christ, rest and refuge and safety. We want churches to be places where people will be able to grow and flourish so that they can go out and live from Christ.

I hope that each section and the discussion questions here will provide a starting point for church leaders and planters to begin to talk and pray together about their context.