

Answering the Call of Christ

The Priority of Church Planting

A History of Grace family Baptist Church of Conroe, Texas.

My family and I began attending a new church in late summer of 2006. Grace Family Baptist Church, on the north side of Houston, TX, had only been planted a few months prior to our attending. We entered into covenant membership that fall, and rejoiced in God's faithfulness to our family to find a solid church, under whose teaching we hoped to grow. It was here that Providence made two profound introductions to me: 1) the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, about which I was unfamiliar prior to attending GFBC; and 2) the brother who would become my dear friend and mentor, Voddie Baucham.

Bro. Voddie and two other men had been sent out to establish a new church plant in early 2006, and they set out from the beginning to guard the church's teaching ministries by means of the 1689 Confession. They did not fully understand all that would entail, and in fact the other two of those initial elders proved not to subscribe fully the Confession of Faith. A second key commitment of the church was simplicity, adopting the Regulative Principle of Worship, along with promoting simplicity in all ministries and programs, both allowing and encouraging sufficient time for family discipleship. Thirdly, the church was committed to planting churches. This final commitment was front and center, driving how we thought about church membership, funding, missions, and leadership development. This emphasis on church planting proved both helpful and short-sighted. The emphasis was helpful in that God's people heard frequently the need and benefit of fulfilling the Great Commission through the planting of churches, rather than the broader evangelical emphasis on personal evangelism. But the passion to plant also proved harmful, as we did not pay enough attention to the hazards that can attend the planting of new churches.

First, because of our emphasis on church planting, what was helpful to us as a church body? We were intentional about cultivating leaders, especially teachers. Bro. Voddie led a two-year training and internship for lay men in the congregation, preparing them to teach, preach, counsel, and lead our Lord's people. I was an experienced Sunday School teacher prior to attending GFBC, but the only experience I had preaching was in the context of street preaching on short-term missions' projects. I benefitted tremendously from the GFBC Leadership Training, and began to teach and then preach in the congregation, under the oversight of the elders. The Lord blessed those labors — both the elders and mine — and in 2008 I was ordained as an elder at GFBC. Other men also benefitted from the training, and I'm convinced that our "in-house" approach to training was an encouragement to the whole congregation. In March 2010, two church planters, four deacons, and roughly a dozen households were sent out to plant a church in Conroe, TX, approximately 45 minutes north of the meeting place of our sending church. We constituted eight months later in November 2010.

Many blessings attended our emphasis on church planting, but what were the hazards and difficulties that accompanied our insistence on church planting? First, in our zeal to plant churches, we were not as careful in the selection of church planters and other potential leaders in the church as the Scripture commands us to be (1 Timothy 5:22ff). Consequently, the quality of the men sent out to plant in Conroe suffered. My own preparation was practically and theologically limited, and the other man sent to plant alongside me had not been sufficiently tested. While my co-elder was willing to teach and preach, he soon proved unwilling to shepherd God's people. He was ordained only a few months before we planted the church, and almost certainly a longer period of testing as an intern and/or

gifted brother would have revealed significant practical and theological deficiencies that would not be overcome. We were convinced of the necessity of sending two elders to plant, but we were both bi-vocational and inexperienced pastors. When it came to church planting, our passion outran our prudence. We simply rushed the process of vetting and training men, with disastrous results. Sadly, of the men who laid hands on me in ordination, only Bro. Voddie has remained in ministry and faithful to our Confession.

Secondly, we took for granted that key people involved in the sending church and in the work of the church plant were theologically and ecclesiastically of one mind. This too proved a costly error. Within our first six months, one of the men who would serve as a deacon in the Conroe plant had to be disciplined publicly, and another one resigned his membership and his diaconate during the same time. Over the next three years we would lose all our original deacons and my co-elder. It was as if a fuse to a bomb had been lit, unknowingly, prior to our launch, and the bomb would explode five years in, scattering sheep and nearly destroying the church. In our zeal to plant churches, we had not successfully built in the minds of God's people, including the leaders of the church plant, a robust and Reformed Baptist theology and ecclesiology.

Nevertheless, our risen and exalted Savior proved Himself far more kind and wise than we even knew. By His strength we persevered together, and have prospered in many ways as a Reformed Baptist Church, growing in love for Christ and one another. A little over a year after we planted, I received an invitation to attend a quarterly meeting of the Texas Area Association of Reformed Baptist Churches (TAARBC). Providentially, this coincided with deliberate efforts between GfBC Conroe and our sending church to begin a fellowship of Confessional Baptist Churches. From July 2011, the pastors of those churches helped me grow in the theological and practical prioritization of our Confession of Faith, and we joined the membership of TAARBC in early 2016. GfBC Conroe joined ARBCA in 2017, and our sister churches have been a continual source of instruction and encouragement to me and to our congregation. In 2016, we reconstituted with new governing documents, in which we made our priorities clearer, including the requirement that all officers strictly subscribe the Second London Confession. I remain the only elder at GfBC Conroe, and we currently have three faithful deacons, all of whom also fully subscribe our Confession.

Today we enjoy the fellowship of our Triune God among a diverse group of saints who are growing weekly under the ordinary means of grace. Our Lord Jesus has manifested His nearness to His church in Conroe, and He has sustained us through many blessings and sorrows together. By His grace and Spirit's power, we are very hopeful about the future of this congregation. To bring us forward to our current circumstances, the Lord has provided for us our own meeting place that we rent from a godly widow who has been very kind to us, located on the southeast side of Conroe, just outside the city limits. We have 21 households represented among the covenant members of GfBC Conroe, along with a steady stream of visitors. Our members are geographically spread out, such that our northernmost and southernmost members are three hours apart. Multiple households drive over an hour to attend church. Consequently, we seek to make the most of the Lord's Day together. We begin with Sunday School at 9:45 am, followed by corporate worship at 11:00. We have a weekly fellowship meal beginning at 1:00 pm, followed by a corporate prayer meeting beginning at 2:15. Our formal schedule wraps up by 3:30, but often there are members remaining later in the day enjoying fellowship together.

In addition to our regular Lord's Day meetings, I lead the GfBC Conroe School of Faithful Men twice monthly on Lord's Day evenings, during which a handful of our men who have expressed a desire to teach are studying key books, listening to lectures, and writing papers to prepare themselves to teach and preach. We are praying the Lord may use this means to call forth some gifted brothers, and perhaps another elder (or more!). Outside of the Lord's Day, one of our men leads a study in systematic theology twice monthly, and we have multiple opportunities for fellowship scheduled monthly, while also encouraging house to house hospitality among our members.

On behalf of the Saints at GfBC Conroe,
David Shiflet, Pastor