

Theology and Church Planting

Kyoritsu Christian Institute October 7, 2003

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Introduction

The disciplines of theology and mission seem to have a rather confusing relationship. Theologians seem not to be well read in missiological literature. They tend to relegate missiology to pragmatic application of the more important teachings which flow from theology. On the other hand, missiologists tend to read only the theology which was required of them while they were students. They tend to impatiently view theology as impractical discussion among ivory tower specialists.

My desire is to integrate the worlds of theology and mission by being both a missionary and a theologian. The balance is not easy to attain. I am a missionary. This means I have trained to a certain degree in missiology. Furthermore I have a fair bit of experience in cross-cultural church planting. But I am also a lecturer in theology. This means I have an education in systematic theology. So as a missionary, I think about theology through the eyes of a missionary. And as a theologian, I think about mission from a theological perspective. At least this is the ideal balance toward which I aim. You will have to be the judge as to how successful I am at being both a missionary and a theologian.

Today, I want to try to show what I mean by thinking theologically about mission. The emphasis is on the word “try.” More specifically, I want to try to integrate one aspect of mission with theology. The aspect of mission I am referring to is church planting. I would first like to try to relate church planting to biblical theology. And then I will try to relate it to systematic theology. In sum, my purpose today is to think theologically about church planting.

Thinking Theologically about Church Planting using Biblical Theology

According to the Apostle Paul, it is through the Church that God proclaims his glory: “His [God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the

rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 3:10 [NIV]). The Church is therefore an instrument of God’s mission.

The instrumental nature of God’s people can be seen when the broad strokes of a biblical theology of mission are described in terms of God’s progressive consecration of his creation. The Bible begins with the good but as yet unconsecrated creation. It ends with the holy eschatological re-creation. Both discontinuity and continuity can be seen between these two poles. For instance, on the one hand, the rural motif of the ancient garden seems to stand in sharp contrast to the urban motif of the eschatological city. But on the other hand, the eschatological city is very different than a city made by human hands, for central to the consecrated city is its river, which flows down the main street of the city, and on both banks of which is planted the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2 [NIV]). This eschatological city, then, seems very much like a garden. The urban and rural motifs seem to be intermingled, implying a kind of cohesiveness, or continuity, between the two. The two motifs apparently do not suggest an exclusive disjunction as do our ideas of the rural and the urban.

It seems the eschatological urban re-creation is a fulfillment of the ancient rural creation. The ancient story of the garden begs for ultimate completion in a place just like the eschatological city. The first solitary couple of the garden contrast with the countless and racially variegated inhabitants of the holy city (Rev. 5:9, 7:9). The citizens of the metropolis are the fulfillment of the command given in the garden to be fruitful and to multiply (Gen. 1:28). They are the redeemed people of God who have not gathered automatically or naturally, but as a result of the intentional mission of God.¹ He has redeemed them and they inhabit the city he has built. Furthermore, he has employed them in his mission.

VanGemenen’s study of the development of God’s progressive plan of salvation can be seen as a model of how the hope of creation’s final consecration can provide thematic continuity from Genesis to

¹John Stott, “The Living God is a Missionary God,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981), 18.

Revelation.² His work represents an attempt in biblical theology to understand the story of salvation as a cohesive and continuous unfolding of God's eschatological purpose of consecrating creation.

Mission seen as God's progressive consecration of creation carries at least two implications for church planting. The first implication has to do with our position within salvation history. Paul stood at the same juncture in the unfolding of God's mission as we do—namely, between Christ's first and second comings. The churches he founded were instruments of God's mission. The implication to consider here is that, like Paul, our missional ministry in places where there are no or few churches should prioritize church planting. Within the flow of salvation history, we stand where Paul stood. To a certain degree, then, our church planting should reflect Paul's church founding. Like Paul, the essence of our missional task lies in the global proclamation of the gospel of Christ resulting in the establishment of churches. When peoples from all nations respond in faith and obedience to the gospel, new communities of God's redeemed people are created. The people of God so gathered eagerly await the final consecration of creation, the ultimate mission of God. These communities of the kingdom of God are a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom.

A second implication is that the ultimate goal of church planting transcends the daily business of church planting. A theology of church planting recognizes that newly planted churches are not themselves the final goal of church planting ministry. Rather, they are instruments used by God to fulfill his cosmic design and purpose. The ultimate goal of church planting therefore transcends the local goals of a church planting ministry. The local ministry finds its ultimate purpose in a divine purpose. When the transcending purpose is neglected and not conceptualized, church planting becomes too easily viewed as an end in itself. In the same way the Church is instrumental in God's unfolding plan of redemption and of final consecration, church planting is better viewed as an instrument of God's cosmic mission.

²Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

Well, these two implications are probably not surprising. They may seem obvious to those who read biblical theology. But this kind of theological thinking about church planting is rare. My desire is to think intentionally about church planting using theological perspectives found in biblical theology. One recent work which has caught my attention is David Pao's work on the Isaianic theological base for the book of Acts.³ If Pao is correct in his interpretation, then it follows that mission, including church planting, ought to be centered on both Jesus Christ, the logos, and the proclamation of the logos of God. Contemporary theology of mission seems to emphasize the pneumacentric nature of mission. Perhaps Pao's work provides a fresh way of thinking about church planting as a christocentric missional enterprise.

Thinking Theologically about Church Planting using Systematic Theology

I have developed a habit of looking for writings which deal with the link between church planting and theology. This is because I need theological encouragement for my church planting. I have come to the conclusion that such books are rare. There are numerous good books on mission. But these usually touch in only a cursory manner upon both or either church planting and theology. I have found only one book which has theology of church planting as its major theme.⁴

I believe church planting should be rooted in a combined missional and theological framework. One aspect of this theological framework is ecclesiology, or the study of the Church. Church planters are performers of missional ecclesiology. It follows that our performance can conceivably be improved by accessing the resources found in writings which deal with theology of the Church. Let's take Karl Barth as one example.

³David W. Pao. *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

⁴Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Carlisle, Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 1998).

Barth's ecclesiology is characterized by an emphasis on the mission of the Church.⁵ Others have given similar emphasis.⁶ But Barth is arguably the theological giant of twentieth century Protestant theology, and so is chosen here. However, his selection does not imply a naïve acceptance of his theology. For instance, his theology proper posits a yawning ontological gap between God and humanity such that God becomes unreal and remote.⁷ Not even Barth's Christology overcomes this problem. I think Millard Erickson is correct in emphasizing continuity between God and humanity. Nevertheless, I believe Barth's ecclesiology can be a good theological resource for church planters.

Barth was a churchman driven by pastoral concerns and committed to instructing the community of the faithful.⁸ Therefore he was particularly concerned about the preaching responsibilities of pastors.⁹ His desire was to make the Bible the root of all Christian thinking and teaching so that the theological student would be better prepared to minister in the pastorate, particularly the pulpit, and so that the Church would be better served. These ecclesiastical concerns of Barth align with the interests of church planters.

⁵Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2,3 (New York: Scribner, 1955).

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others" in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 253. Other theologians have also emphasized that the church exists for the world: Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1, G. W. Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 345, 362; Hans Küng, *The Church: Maintained in Truth*, E. Quinn, trans. (New York: Seabury, 1980), 485-86; Albert Theodore Eastman, *Chosen and Sent: Calling the Church to Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 129, 132-33.

⁷See chapter three of Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Unreal God of Modern Theology* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988).

⁸See Donald G. Bloesch, "Karl Barth and the Life of the Church," *Center Journal* 1 (1981): 65.

⁹"My whole theology is fundamentally a theology for pastors. It grew out of my own situation when I had to teach and preach and counsel." Karl Barth, *Final Testimonies*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23.

The way in which Barth derives his ecclesiology directly from his theology (his discussion of justification, sanctification, and vocation) is unique. His ecclesiology is not an afterthought, an appendage added at the end of his theology. Rather, it is derived from his teaching about reconciliation or salvation, doctrines that are central to his theological system. The result is that Barth's ecclesiology has an important place in his theology. According to Barth, the Church exists for the world, even as Christ was sent for the world. The Church exists for those who are not yet its members.

If a theology for church planting was to learn from Barth's ecclesiological methodology and also show an understanding of the eschatological purposes of God evident in much biblical theology, it would demonstrate that missional church planting is grounded in the triune God and in his salvation. From Barth the church planter can learn that the Church is the primary means through which God achieves his global purposes for the people of the world. Church planting is an accurate reflection of the passion of God for the eternally lost who are not yet a part of the Church. The missional movement of God is towards sinners, towards those who yet need to repent, towards the world.

Another example of a theological resource available for church planting theology is the recent work in ecclesiology by Miroslav Volf of Yale.¹⁰ Volf makes the Triune God the foundation of the Church. That is, the nature of the Church reflects the nature of God himself. However, because of the hiddenness of God as he is in himself—the *ad intra* characteristics of the Trinity—I am not convinced we can draw a direct inference between the nature of the Church and the nature of God. But Volf has made a good case for the compatibility of the congregational church government—what he calls Free church—with postmodernity. This could have significant implications for thinking theologically about church planting.

¹⁰Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Conclusion

These forays into biblical and systematic theology are just a few examples of how a theology of church planting can be developed. In conclusion, let me suggest three reasons why it is important to try to integrate theology with missional church planting.

First, the attempt to integrate encourages missiologists to think about theology. Missiologists tend to read Newbigin, for instance, but not Pinnock. Conversely, integration encourages theologians to think about church planting. Theologians probably have read Pinnock, but not likely too much of Newbigin. I believe integration can benefit both theology and mission.

Second, integration can provide a theological base and motivation for doing missional church planting. This will help us move away from a dependence upon pragmatic reasons for church planting.

Third, integration results in encouragement for church planters. In cultures resistant to the gospel message, church planting can be discouraging. Thinking theologically about church planting will encourage church planters in their missionary work.

I am eager to explore ways of developing a theology of church planting. For example, I am hoping to establish a church planting institute of theology. Perhaps I am being too bold in stating this, but I think a good place to do so would be right here at Kyoritsu Christian Institute. I would be interested in further dialogue about such a possibility.