

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: The Church as God's Missional Instrument

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, and 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.

Several implications for the mission of the people of God flow from the idea of divine consecration of creation. For instance, the Bible shows that God chooses his people, that his people respond to him in faith, and that he fulfills his mission through his people. VanGemen'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 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.

Furthermore, and significant for our theme of church planting, mission as consecration of creation carries at least two implications for church planting. First, our model for mission should reflect Paul's church founding ambition to proclaim and preach the gospel where Christ is not known (Rom. 15:19-20) because 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. Like Paul, our missional ministry in places where there are no or few churches should also prioritize church planting. The essence of our missional task lies in the global proclamation of the gospel of Christ resulting in the establishment of churches, rather than building our own kingdoms or transforming the macro structures of societies. When peoples from all nations respond in faith and obedience to Christ, 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.

Second, the ultimate goal of church planting transcends the daily business of church planting. A theology of church planting recognizes that the new communities being established, rather than being themselves the only and final goal of church planting ministry, are also instruments used by God to fulfill his cosmic design and purpose. The ultimate goal of church planting both includes the local church's ministry, and transcends it. When the transcending purpose is neglected and not conceptualized, church planting becomes too easily viewed as an end in itself. Rather, church planting is better viewed as an instrument of God's cosmic mission, in the same way the Church is instrumental in God's unfolding plan of redemption and of consecration.

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Vancouver Canada, November 2002 copyright

¹ John 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.

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