

Why Bother Thinking Theologically About Church Planting?

It was once again time to rearrange the furniture in our living room. We were required to do this neither because we had just purchased some new furniture nor because we unrealistically wanted our home to look like photos in a recent issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Rather, we needed to create space for some people coming over. In fact, they came to our house every week on Sundays. In preparation, every Saturday evening we rearranged our furniture. The mini-sized Japanese sofa was moved aside, the coffee table was moved to a corner making a good place for books or flowers, folding chairs were placed in every available inch of the living room and the adjoining kitchen/dining room, and a portable podium I had made was placed in the “front” of the living room. The first floor of our house had once again been temporarily transformed into a church building.

This was cross-cultural church planting in Japan, and we were in the thick of it. The myriad of pragmatic details needing attention throughout the week demanded our focus and attention. It was very easy in our church planting ministry to think mostly about urgent but practical issues. How do we have an evangelistic tract ordered and delivered? How do we find time to prepare for our next English class, Bible study, or sermon, when the necessities of taking children to the doctor’s office (requiring at least half a day), getting the van repaired, participating in field leadership decision making, or writing one more letter to our supporting churches back “home” all seem so urgent?

In the midst of all this necessary pragmatic flurry of church planting activities, perspective was often elusive. Why do we expend so much of our personal and missional energy and resources on church planting in the first place? Let me try to unpack this question in an inductive manner.

Why rearrange the furniture in our home every Saturday evening? In order to hold a worship service the next day. Why hold a worship service? In order to strengthen and encourage the small group of believers. Why strengthen them? In order to equip them (and us) to do the ministry. What ministry? Reaching the millions in Japan who don’t yet know Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Why reach them? Because God has commanded us to go, disciple, teach and baptize all over the globe. Why obey that command? So that people from all nations will learn to love and worship the Lord thus bringing God greater glory.

Answers to these kind of questions can ultimately be tracked back to theology, bringing that academic discipline to the front and center. In some circles theology has an unfortunate, although not entirely undeserved, reputation for being boring and impractical. But it just might also be important. Is it not imperative for any church planter to theologically ponder topics like church, worship, ministry, discipleship, evangelism and leadership? After all, God himself is at the center of these issues. I am convinced that the single purpose of our various church planting ministries is ultimately embedded within the global vision of God himself. If it is true that church planting is intimately linked to God’s heart for the world, it follows that church planting is ultimately a theological enterprise.

It should come as no surprise, then, that theology can provide helpful perspective for church planting. I believe frantic tendencies in our church planting can be transformed into wise church planting at least partly through sound theological thinking and deliberation about church planting. “Evangelical theology, at its best, is a matter of deliberating well (e.g., canonically) about the gospel in non-canonical (e.g., contemporary) situations.”¹ If it is true that theology consists of both speech and action, as has been argued by the author of the preceding quote, then church planters model theology or perform ecclesiology in a way rarely exhibited by theologians.

Church planters significantly and uniquely participate in God's unfolding theological drama of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

So why bother thinking theologically about church planting? Because the ultimate theological goal of church planting transcends the daily business of church planting. Understanding, clarifying, and consciously embracing this theological goal can empower church planters to carry out the myriad of details necessary for sticking with the job and getting it done.

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¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, 2000), 84.