

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Motivational Energy for Church Planting

During one four year stretch of church planting in Japan I intentionally modeled a certain style of leadership. I thought the people in my church plant had settled nicely into the way my wife and I were “doing church.” So when our church plant called its first Japanese pastor, it was with no little surprise that we watched him easily and quickly implement a style of leadership which was diametrically opposed to ours. The people of the church seemed to take to the new leadership style like fish to water.

Even after picking ourselves up from the floor, shedding a few tears, placing some time and distance between us and the newly planted church, and gaining some perspective, we still felt like we had lost confidence in our ability to church plant in Japan. Perhaps it would be easier to be a theological educator than a church planter! The leadership transition from expatriate missionary to national pastor had been painful.

Nevertheless, God opened up for us another opportunity for church planting. So we stepped out in fragile faith trying once again to implement something like the Pauline cycle of church planting.

According to 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, Paul experienced many problems and crises in his ministry of church founding. What motivated him to persevere at the task? One answer can probably be found in his conviction that, though a frail jar of clay, by divine grace Paul understood himself to be a uniquely designed vessel through which the powerful and glorious gospel of Jesus Christ could shine (2 Cor. 4:7). Paul could testify that God faithfully establishes communities of believers through the pain, and in Paul’s case through the danger, experienced by the church planter.

Paul must have been a highly motivated missionary. After about 25 years of difficult church planting ministry he told the church in Rome that his ambition was to preach the gospel in Spain (Rom. 15:20-24). His years of sometimes difficult ministry, along with its victories and difficulties, had not stunted his vision for founding churches. In Romans 15 he stated at least three reasons for his ambitious vision. First, the churches he had already planted were adequate to carry out the gospel ministry in the eastern Mediterranean region (15:23). Second, he was eager to minister in places further west like Spain where there were no churches (15:20). Third, although Antioch in Syria had been the place from which he had launched the first phase of his church founding ministry, the Asian Minor portion, he apparently hoped the Roman church would send him off to Spain to carry out the next phase of his ministry (15:24). Perhaps Paul was trying to develop a creative partnership with the Roman church. But even if not, it is clear that after 25 years of ministry Paul still seemed to be motivated by a boundless source of energy and vision for his work of founding new churches.

Japan is a tough place to be church planting. We recognize the facts about ministry in Japan: there is only one church for every 16,000 people; some towns and cities have no credible gospel witness; and the evangelical population is half of one percent. We also recognize that most of us have a supporting constituency and a mission agency which desire to encourage us toward effective church planting. Some of us work in close partnerships with sending churches and receiving denominations. It would seem that our church planting shares some common ground with Paul’s church founding ministry. Perhaps we can learn from Paul about motivation for church planting.

So when you begin to think of your church planting as moving three steps forward and at least two backward, may God give you the energy to keep going. Be encouraged and amazed that God has chosen to shine his powerful gospel light through jars of clay like you and me. Be hopeful that you will be able to testify like Paul that God has proven faithful to both you a church planter and to the churches he is planting through you. Be motivated by the vision for church planting which God gives you.

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Tokyo, May 2004