

## **Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Church Planting as God's Missional Re-Creation**

It is possible there are fundamental incompatibilities between current Japanese culture and the Church of Jesus Christ birthed in Japan through the gospel. For example, vertically structured Japanese culture seems to exhibit a tendency toward leadership by control. So Japanese pastors naturally tend to lead through control, which makes the pastor central to ministry, rather than leading by empowerment, which emphasizes the significance of lay ministry sourced in spiritual gifting.

This culturally rooted controlling leadership style raises theological questions, not only about personal leadership style, but also about decision making in the local church. Congregationalism is leadership of the many. It might be emerging as the predominant decision making structure among evangelical churches in our postmodern world. It has strong Biblical support. By contrast, Japanese culture tends to push pastors toward leadership of the few or even leadership of the one.

For instance, teamwork between pastors and lay leaders requires good two way communication and open discussion. But the vertical structure of Japanese society reflected in many Japanese churches tends to undermine open communication because the role of the pastor is to lead through control. A healthy local church requires a pastor who understands that his gifts are complemented by others on his team and who releases other people for ministering out of their spiritual gifts. Although happy exceptions can be found, it seems the culturally acceptable tendency in Japan is for pastors (and often lay leaders too) to control those they lead. This propensity makes leadership of the many (congregationalism) a hard sell in Japan.

Similar examples of the tendency toward leadership of the few or the one can be seen at denominational levels in Japan. It seems acceptable for Japanese church leadership decisions at the national level of an association of churches to be made by the one or the few.

Does this apparent Japanese inclination toward controlling rather than empowering leadership erode our energy for church planting in Japan? Does it undermine what we as church planters (and waterers) are trying to do? If so, where do we find the motivation to keep going? Talking with one another, both other expatriate church planters and Japanese pastors, about the Biblical and theological factors at stake is certainly part of the answer. Should these discussions end on a positive note, encouragement can result. But if the outcome of such dialogue is less than positive, where then do we find encouragement to keep going? This is where thinking theologically about church planting can provide bedrock motivation.

Van Gelder has pointed out that Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 are the bookends to the rest of the biblical narrative. The first two chapters of the Bible tell of the original creation. The last two chapters prophesy the eschatological consummation. He classifies all the biblical material in between as God's re-creation, necessitated by human sin which marred the good creation. Van Gelder goes on to point out that the Church is to be God's "missionary people," created and sent by our "missionary God" to become the place where God carries out his redemptive work.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 89-90, 96-100.

If Van Gelder is correct, the essential purpose of the Church is missional. And if so, then it is not enough to simply recognize that the Church needs to be conscious of its missional role and thus become more missions minded. It is not simply that our ecclesiology needs to be better informed by its missiological purpose. It is not enough to develop a “missiological ecclesiology” (a popular catch phrase in some missiological circles) which reminds us of the importance of mission for the Church. This kind of approach results in making mission one more special interest of local churches, alongside many other particular interests, because priority is given to the Church over the mission of God. After all, “missiological ecclesiology” is more about ecclesiology than mission. It is mission in the sphere of the Church.

What we really need is an “ecclesiological missiology” which recognizes that the Church lives, moves, and has its being within the mission of God. The Church is God’s missional agent, raised up by our triune God to carry out his redemptive work of re-creation so that he will receive global glory. This gives priority to mission over Church. It places ecclesiology in the context of missiology.

By implication it can therefore be argued that church planting is the ministry of birthing more locations where God can redemptively re-create as part of his global mission. Church planters can then in faith consider themselves to be missionary founders of divine “re-creation places,” working at the very center of God’s mission because the Church is functionally central to God’s mission. Church planters who think theologically in some such manner as this can acquire for themselves motivation for their ministry.

Our church planting in Japan may be done in the midst of significant cultural differences which might give rise to theological disagreements. This kind of cultural and perhaps theological dissonance might undermine our vigor for church planting. As part of the solution, may we learn to derive energy from a theologically sound understanding of our church planting ministry. May we not only plant healthy churches. May we also plant churches in a theologically healthy manner.

Dale Little, PhD  
August 2005