

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Church Planting Located Between Gospel and Culture

One of the tasks of churches is to engage the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, or perhaps better, the gospel which is Jesus Christ. The gospel engages culture when fundamental cultural values are challenged by the gospel. For instance, when it is demonstrated that personal meaning and purpose are best discovered and experienced within the kingdom of God and therefore within those microcosms of the kingdom which we call churches, the gospel has challenged the cultural understanding that personal fulfillment is found in such items as individual wealth and pleasure. The gospel is in a position to engage culture because, among other reasons, the gospel is distinguishable from culture. Churches manifest the gospel, and the God of the gospel, by clothing the gospel with community. These communities or churches therefore acquire the essence of the gospel, making them distinct from the culture and therefore able to prophetically address the culture.

Yet all congregations birthed by the salvifically powerful gospel, though each sharing in the essential elements of the gospel, also bear some of the marks of the culture in which they are located. Cultural diversity affects the look and feel of congregations even though the gospel is at the center of these congregations. In other words, all churches can be located somewhere between gospel and culture in the sense that churches reflect both the essential characteristics of the gospel and the incidental aspects of their cultural context.

When churches become too much like their culture they can no longer engage the culture because they have nothing distinct to offer. It has been argued that this is precisely the conundrum in which North American churches find themselves. They are no longer taken seriously by the culture. Their credibility has been undermined because they share the same malaise and dysfunction of the culture itself. One proposed solution is for churches in North America first to disengage from their culture then to engage the culture once again, this time with a freshly birthed vision of the transforming salvific power of the gospel.¹

But expatriate church planters in Japan face a different scenario. Our church planting can appear so foreign as to be unable to relate to the culture. We ourselves can be so far removed from the culture that the churches we plant might seem out of place in the culture. We indeed might have something distinct and fresh to offer. So it certainly cannot be said of us that we have become indistinguishable from the culture. But what we have to offer might be irrelevant because of its cultural remoteness. This is a sobering thought because the long term fruit of our ministry, especially its continuation after we leave the scene (as most expatriates seem to do), is quite dependent upon its reproducibility. Culturally remote ministry will not likely survive the test of time.

There are at least two suggestions to ponder when we combine the idea that church planting resides somewhere between gospel and culture with the realization that expatriate missionaries in Japan are by definition culturally remote from those to whom they minister. First, we would be wise to avoid unilateral ministry initiatives even though we feel those initiatives might be needed and might make our creative juices flow. Such initiatives might look good to our supporting constituency and to executives of mission organizations in the West. However, from the perspective of Japanese church leaders, they might appear irrelevant at best, and paternalistic at worst. Second, we would do well to try to plant churches alongside our Japanese brothers and sisters, both pastors and laity. Working together would likely include respectful, but not always easy, discussions about how churches in Japan might at times give precedence to

culture over gospel. The missionary church planter who partners in this manner shows respect for Japanese churches and their cultural context.

Though beyond the scope of this short column, these suggestions might be applicable to missionaries in Japan other than church planters. But if you are a church planter in Japan, may your awareness that your church planting ministry lies somewhere between gospel and culture provide you with a fresh way of thinking about your ministry. And may you be wise in your Christocentric, cross-cultural church planting.

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¹ Douglas John Hall, "Ecclesia Crucis: The Theologic of Christian Awkwardness," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 203-06. See also the Gospel and Our Culture Network, <http://www.gocn.org/>.