

## **Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing**

Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock has developed a theology of religions which follows the hermeneutical method of unpacking a sub-theme within Scriptures, namely God's salvific work among the "pagans," rather than the major plot line of God's work of salvation in and through his chosen people.<sup>1</sup> Thus Pinnock appeals to the necessity of using peripheral and often less clear passages or personages of Scripture in order to build his case.<sup>2</sup> The resultant theology of religions is dependent upon Biblical texts which are open to varied and debatable interpretations.

An evangelical theology of religions which takes seriously its responsibility to resonate with the major themes of Biblical teaching regarding other religions and religious others will not elevate the sub-themes to the extent that the major themes are, at best, overlooked, and at worst overturned. A sound hermeneutic suggests that the texts in which the sub-themes are located should take their interpretive context from the clearer texts which produce the major themes.

Likewise, an evangelical theology of mission will intentionally reflect major Biblical themes of mission. Kostenberger and O'Brien tell us that the overarching emphasis of the Bible is on God's mission of extending salvation to the ends of the earth. The Biblical metanarrative takes us from creation through re-creation to the new creation. God ultimately and decisively accomplishes his mission of salvation by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. The Father sends his Son so that through his life and work the forgiveness of sins becomes possible for those who believe. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, accessibility to that salvation comes through proclamation of the gospel by those who are sent forth as witnesses of Jesus Christ. Through their witness God the Father continues to send his Son into the world. That is, when the gospel is proclaimed, those who believe are responding to Jesus himself. This ongoing mission of Jesus as described in Acts and the Pauline letters resulted in the establishment of Christian communities. Pauline church founding began with gospel proclamation but did not stop at that primary initiatory level of evangelism. Paul sought to bring believers to full maturity in Christ within the context of a local church community. For Paul, church founding included providing theological teaching, pastoral advice, and the general strengthening of believers in the new churches. All this ministry was understood as continuing the mission of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

In his mammoth two volume work on mission, Schnabel also reasons that in his church founding ministry Paul was more than an initiator: "Paul accompanied those local congregations born as a result of his missionary ministry on their way to the dynamic maturity of faith..."<sup>4</sup> Paul was intent on seeing his converts and his churches move toward spiritual maturity. This is true even though in the case of Corinth Paul could say he had the initiatory planting ministry and Apollos had the follow up watering ministry (1 Cor. 3:6). According to Schnabel, Paul's church founding praxis generally had three phases: evangelistic proclamation of the gospel, establishment of churches, and then the final phase of theological, ethical, and spiritual consolidation of the new churches.<sup>5</sup> Paul's church founding included church watering.

Missionaries, mission agencies, and missiologists have emphasized a host of ministries, including church planting, evangelism, education, student ministry, Bible translation, inter-religious dialogue, and relief work. Most mission agencies define themselves in relation to one or two of these ministries.

If the major theme of mission in the Bible is as sketched above by Kostenberger and O'Brien, and if our missional ministry is to resonate with that major theme, then we ought to be able to draw direct links between our ministry and that major theme. Should we be unable to do

so, then we have, for whatever reasons, substituted a sub-theme for the major theme. We have forgotten to keep the main thing the main thing.

Church planting is one missional ministry which can easily trace links to the major theme of Biblical mission. Church planters proclaim the gospel in a variety of creative ways with a view to starting churches. If our church planting ministry is to take its cues from Pauline ministry, then our church planting ministry should look somewhat like his church founding ministry. The full spectrum of our missional ministry should therefore include evangelism, church planting, and church watering. This implies that in order for our church planting ministry to fully resonate with Pauline church founding we should be motivated by a desire to see people progress toward maturity in Christ. Our missional concerns to see that people are converted and churches are birthed should be matched by a desire to nurture these new communities.

Mission which desires to resonate with the major Biblical theme of mission and which models itself after Biblical missional praxis will not elevate any one ministry above the cluster of missional ministries which surface in the New Testament: evangelism, church planting, and church watering. Perhaps that cluster is best called discipleship. To do otherwise is, for whatever pragmatic reasons, to overlook at best, and to overturn at worst, Biblical foundations for mission.

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<sup>1</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, "Clark Pinnock's Response to Part 3," in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2000), 261-62.

<sup>2</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 157-58; and Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 22.

<sup>3</sup>Andreas Kostenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2001), 179-84, 262-70.

<sup>4</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2, *Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 1484.

<sup>5</sup>Schnabel, *Paul and the Early Church*, 948, 950-53, 981-82, 1416-19, 1480, 1484-85.