

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: How Should We Report About Our Church Planting?

Imagine two missionary households (A and B) who had each completed a church planting project. Both freshly birthed churches were now in the hands of national pastoral leadership which would ideally build on the foundation laid by the missionaries. These two missionary households were now ready to move on to their next church planting placement. But before launching out again they each needed to take a home assignment.

When missionary household A on home assignment was asked about what kind of work they did, they hesitatingly replied that they had really struggled with the language and so were not very good at communicating, that they hoped the content of their teaching and preaching had been mostly understood, that only a few people had come to accept Jesus as Saviour, that they did not yet like much Japanese food, that their strategies always seemed to end up hitting a brick wall, but that somehow a church had been birthed which now had an attendance of only about 30 adults on Sunday mornings. If it was not for the good result (30 people!), this style of reporting left their listeners wondering this household had the gifts and abilities to be cross cultural church planters.

When missionary household B was asked about their ministry, they confidently replied that they had mastered the Japanese language as well as any foreigner could, that their teaching and preaching had been well received and of course understood, that quite a few people had become believers and had been baptized (but no numbers given), that they loved sushi (Natto was another thing, however—it might not be edible!), that all their strategies and programs seemed to work, and that God had blessed their efforts by establishing a thriving church of about 15 adults. The communication style of this household convinced those listening that they were good missionaries. Even the end result (15 people!) seemed impressive to those who listened.

At least one question is worth pondering here. How should we speak to our home constituency about our past church planting ministries? When answering this kind of question we must learn to keep our balance between the reporting styles of the two imaginary missionary households above. This balance can come through recognizing that church planting is a theological task. As can be seen from the following two points, God is the leader of our church planting efforts.

First, church planting is a divine attack on the gates of hell. The Church of Jesus Christ will ultimately overcome the entrance to the realm of the evil one. A freshly birthed church is a constant threat to the stronghold of that realm. *I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it* (Mt.16:18) does not mean the Church is desperately defending its territory. Rather, Hades is on the defense and the Church is overtaking it. Jesus himself is leading the attack. The outcome depends upon him. He is the master church planter. The results are within his sovereign control.

Second, God has chosen to grow his church through the initial ministry of church planters and then of church waterers. *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow* (1Cor.3:6). God has historically given church planters the gifting and calling needed for the growth he has planned. But all growth evident in church planting ministry is the work of God himself. He is keeping track of the true growth accomplished through his church planters.

It follows that either to exaggerate or understate the results of our church planting ministry might come close to misrepresenting God's missional work in the world. If as a church planter you tend to understate your role, remember God has gifted you for carrying out his church planting. To imply that God through you has done nothing of significance is to deny one

of his purposes for your life. It is a refusal to appreciate that God's missional goal of proclaiming his glory to the nations involves you.

On the other hand, if you tend to overstate your role in church planting, recognize that you need not impress anyone. You actually run the risk of taking away from the glory of God's own leadership in mission if you exaggerate your own role. His mission in the world involves you, but it does not depend upon you. Good theological judgment here makes church planters humble and modest when they see God use them to bring churches into existence where there were none or very few. Resting in God's missional leadership, church planters can remain calm and confident in the midst of difficult church planting assignments among resistant peoples. Within this theological framework it is even possible to grant the obedient and faithful church planter the freedom to fail.

So when reporting to our home constituency we should strive neither to overstate nor understate our case. Both run the danger of detracting from God's glory. Overstatement does so by implying that we rather than God are the ultimate church planters. Understatement does so by denying that God displays his glory through the ministry he gives to his people. May you keep your theological balance when it comes to reporting about your church planting.

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