

## **Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Barth as a Possible Theological Source**

The performance was about to begin. Negotiations concerning place, length of performance, starting and finishing times, participants, primary and secondary actors, and investments of resources had all successfully concluded. The opening curtain was about to rise. As one of the primary actors, I was a little nervous. This was only my second performance. But the Director's promise of ultimate success was an encouragement. This was no mere ninety minute performance. Like the previous drama I had performed in, this one was also to last about four years. I was about to participate in planting another church in Japan.

During the long performance I would need some helpful resources. So I developed a habit of looking for writings which deal with the link between church planting and theology. I have come to the conclusion that they are rare. There are numerous good books on mission. But these usually touch in only a cursory manner upon both or either church planting and theology. I have found only one book which has theology of church planting as its major theme.<sup>1</sup>

I believe church planting should be rooted in a combined missional and theological framework. One aspect of this theological framework is ecclesiology, or the study of the Church. Church planters are performers of missional ecclesiology. It follows that our performance can conceivably be improved by accessing the resources found in writings which deal with theology of the Church. Let's take one such writer as an example.

Karl Barth's ecclesiology is characterized by an emphasis on the mission of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Others have done the same.<sup>3</sup> But Barth is arguably the theological giant of twentieth century Protestant theology, and so is chosen here. His selection here does not imply a naïve acceptance of his theology. For instance, his theology proper posits a yawning ontological gap between God and humanity such that God becomes unreal and remote.<sup>4</sup> Not even Barth's Christology overcomes this problem. Nevertheless, his ecclesiology can be a good theological resource for church planters.

Barth was a churchman driven by pastoral concerns and committed to instructing the community of the faithful.<sup>5</sup> Therefore he was particularly concerned about the preaching responsibilities of pastors.<sup>6</sup> His desire was to make the Bible the root of all Christian thinking and teaching so that the theological student would be better prepared to minister in the pastorate, particularly the pulpit, and so that the Church would be better served. These ecclesiastical concerns of Barth align with the interests of church planters.

The way in which Barth derives his ecclesiology directly from his theology of justification, sanctification, and vocation is unique. His ecclesiology is not an afterthought, an appendage added at the end of his theology. Rather, it is derived from his teaching about reconciliation or salvation, doctrines that are central to his theological system. The result is that Barth's ecclesiology has an important place in his theology. According to Barth, the Church exists for the world, even as Christ was sent for the world. The Church exists for those who are not yet its members.

If a theology for church planting was both to follow Barth's ecclesiological methodology and show an understanding of the mission of God, it would demonstrate that missional church planting is grounded in the triune God and in his salvation. From Barth the church planter can learn that the Church is the primary means through which God achieves his global purposes for the people of the world. Church planting reflects the passion of God for the eternally lost who are not yet a part of the Church. The missional movement of God is towards sinners, towards those who yet need to repent, towards the world. When God's passion for the salvation of all people is

embedded at the core of church planting, that church planting will display the very heart of our missionary God. To reflect God in this way is to worship him. This is not a cultic, ceremonial worship confined to an hour or two on Sundays. It is the worship of lifelong service, motivated by the mission of God himself.

My enthusiasm and energy for the church plant I am currently performing remains quite high partly because I have learned to access some theological resources. Of course, the primary theological resource for church planters remains the Bible. Mining the resources there should reap the greatest reward. I hope you too are learning how to equip yourself for a faithful church planting performance.

Dale Little, PhD  
Tokyo, February 2002 copyright

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*. (Carlisle, Great Britain: Paternoster Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2,3 (New York: Scribner, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others" in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 253. Other theologians have also emphasized that the church exists for the world: Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1, G. W. Bromiley, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 345, 362; Hans Küng, *The Church: Maintained in Truth*, E. Quinn, trans. (New York: Seabury, 1980), 485-86; Albert Theodore Eastman, *Chosen and Sent: Calling the Church to Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 129, 132-33.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter three of Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Unreal God of Modern Theology* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> See Donald G. Bloesch, "Karl Barth and the Life of the Church," *Center Journal* 1 (1981): 65.

<sup>6</sup> "My whole theology is fundamentally a theology for pastors. It grew out of my own situation when I had to teach and preach and counsel." Karl Barth, *Final Testimonies* ed., Eberhard Busch, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23.