

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Creating Communities of Faith

According to New Testament records of mission in the early Church, conversion to Christ was an event which culminated in new believers becoming members of the earthly community of Christ.¹ The early Church assumed that individual salvific transfer from the kingdom of darkness to that of the Son of God meant a numerical addition to the local church. Luke notes in Acts 2:41 that on the day Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, 3000 newly baptized converts were added to the Jerusalem church. “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” [NIV] Soteriology and ecclesiology were closely linked in the early Church.

Paul’s ministry provides evidence that proclamation of the gospel results in the formation of churches, communities of believers.² These communities were characterized by love, the way of life expected of God’s people from ancient times (Lev 19:18; Prov 20:22, 24:29). Yet there was a new dimension to the love which Jesus commanded of his followers: they were to love one another sacrificially as he had loved them. “A new command I give you: ‘Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’” (John 13:34-35 [NIV]) Unbelievers were attracted to the early Christian community because of the love displayed there.

This obedient love of Christ and of one another results in both the Father’s and the Son’s promised presence with the believer: “we will come to him” (John 14:23). Where loving community is evident, there also Christ is present as the head of the Church. This community of love both nurtures new believers and sends them forth into the world.³

The early communities of faith were primarily located in house churches.⁴ Such communities had been called into existence by the proclamation of the kingdom of God which provides the Church with a present mission and a future eschatological hope. The Church community is a microcosmic foretaste of the eschatological kingdom.⁵ This community makes concrete the nature of salvation, revealing it by demonstration to the world.⁶

As with the early Church, today’s church planters also proclaim the gospel with the purpose of creating new communities of faith. These communities are a showcase of God’s new redeemed re-creation, microcosms of the eschatological community, pointing to the future yet to be completed mission of God’s consecration of the ancient creation. They often begin their existence by gathering in homes. The church planter views the missional task as incomplete until new believers are integrated into various newly created communities of God’s Son, which themselves recognize the importance of reaching out.⁷ A church planter, then, is involved in a creative process.

However, a church planter is also a nurturer. “Proclaiming the gospel meant for Paul not simply an initial preaching or with it the reaping of converts: it included also a whole range of nurturing and strengthening activities which led to the firm establishment of congregations.”⁸ Church planting understood in the context of creating communities of faith requires that church planters nurture the newly created local church. But that is the topic for the next issue: Nurturing New Communities of Faith.

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¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 10-11, 117. Van Engen describes the biblical sense of conversion as a threefold process: 1) conversion to

Christ; 2) conversion to the community; 3) conversion to ministry. Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 152.

²Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 252.

³Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, 90-91.

⁴See Del Birkey, "The House Church: A Missiological Model," *Missiology* 19: 69-80; Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

⁵Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 622-24.

⁶Senior and Stuhlmueller, *Biblical Foundations*, 205.

⁷I am assuming that churches are planted in order to themselves reproduce. This follows from the essential nature of the church "being for others" as per Barth, Bonhoeffer, Thielecke, and others. But note that Paul Bowers in "Church and Mission in Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (1991), 106-11, has called into question whether Paul intended to found churches that themselves would be reproducing. In response, O'Brien has offered a convincing critique. P. T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 109-32.

⁸Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 184.