

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Nurturing Communities of Faith

“Sensei (teacher), please bring a short biblical message at the beginning of our business meeting next week.” “Sensei, I feel as if God has abandoned me.” “Sensei, we’d like you to perform our engagement ceremony.” “Sensei, my mother was hospitalized yesterday. Please pray for her.” “Sensei, can you teach that twelve week class on our doctrinal statement again?”

These kind of requests and comments do not sound like the kind which might be found on the forefront of evangelism. Nevertheless, the issues above typify discussions with people in my church plant. The issues often deal more with establishing the church plant than with evangelizing the lost. From a practical point of view, it seems that a major and necessary role of the church planting missionary is to provide care and nurture for the community of faith which the church planter is trying to coax into existence.

Perhaps this necessity of nurturing runs counter to a common caricature of the ideal missionary church planter which places emphasis upon the necessity of a church planter having a cluster of gifts centering on evangelism. When describing a cross cultural church planter, the idea of a “church planting evangelist” often seems to carry more credence than a “church planting teacher.” Evangelism is seen to be at the forefront of church planting. Evangelism is where the only real action is said to be located. By contrast, the person gifted as a teacher is portrayed as filling a secondary role in missional church planting. The ministry of teaching and encouraging is viewed as important only because it conveniently fills in the gaps of care left in the wake of the ambitious evangelistic church planter’s ministry.

However, there seems to be significant biblical evidence that Paul himself was as much a teacher and nurturer as he was an evangelist and initiator. For example, if Paul had not prioritized the nurturing aspect of his church founding ministry our New Testament would be deprived of most of its letters. And again, Paul did not hesitate to use maternal and nourishing terminology to describe his brief but demographically significant church founding ministry at Thessalonica: “As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.” (1 Thes 2:6-7 NIV)

Interestingly, J. I. Packer, professor of theology at Regent College, subsumes Paul’s self understanding of evangelism under the rubric of teaching: “His primary task in evangelism was to teach the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ Apparently Packer does not see a disjunction between Paul’s teaching and his evangelism.

Furthermore, Andreas Kostenberger, professor of NT at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Peter O’Brien, professor of NT and Missions at Moore Theological College, in their outstanding recent monograph on biblical theology of mission, point out that *euangelizomai* (“to preach the gospel” or “to evangelize”) as it appears in Pauline literature cannot be narrowly defined. “Although this verb is often taken to include only initial or primary evangelism, Paul employs the *euangelion* word-group to cover the whole range of evangelistic and teaching ministry—from the initial proclamation of the gospel to the building up of believers and grounding them firmly in the faith.”²

For Paul, the ministry of founding a new local church included an intentional ministry of care and nurture. Paul the church founding theologian might not fit the popular caricature of a church planter described above. This may be because Paul was both an evangelist and a teacher. He was both an initiator and a nurturer.

Perhaps we missional church planters should consider following Paul's example by choosing to intentionally engage in both evangelism and teaching, in both creating and nurturing. Thinking theologically about church planting can provide motivation for trying to keep our balance between these two equally important aspects of church planting ministry. Does your church planting, and the educational training you have chosen to pursue, provide evidence that you are trying to keep your balance?

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¹ J. I. Packer. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1961), 46.

² Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 183.