

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: When Little is Big

Have you often wished the size of the Church of Jesus Christ in Japan would be bigger than it is? I have. Church planters in Japan and in other resistant cultures can be encouraged to persevere in their ministry by understanding that small can be significant within God's mission.¹

In John 1:14 we are taught that the Son of God, by virtue of his incarnation, lived or dwelt among us. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." This image of God dwelling among us comes from the Old Testament context of God choosing to dwell with his chosen people. Now, we know that God cannot be contained geographically (1 Ki. 8:27). Yet from the time of creation it seems that our God has been determined to dwell on a miniscule level with the people he creates, loves and chooses. Remind yourself of God walking with Adam in the primordial garden, or of his choosing to dwell with the former slaves fleeing from Egypt (Exod. 29:45-46). Furthermore, when we look toward the future we also know that God's intention is to continue dwelling with us on into eternity (Rev. 21:3).

But according to John 1:14 it is in Jesus Christ that we see the epitome of God's way of dwelling with us. His clearest way of dwelling with us is through his Son, who exegetes the Father. If we want to find God, to see God, to know God, we need look no further than Jesus himself.

This is a strong affirmation of the centrality of Jesus to the Christian faith. Therefore, once Jesus has ascended back to heaven after his approximately thirty years of dwelling with humanity, we would expect his followers in the early Church, those who penned the New Testament, to point exclusively to Jesus as the only place where the Father has chosen to reveal himself.

Yet surprisingly, perhaps astoundingly, the apostle who penned John 1:18 also wrote 1 John 4:12. In 1 John 4:12 John tells us that God is revealed in another place as well. In this verse he is answering the question, "Where can God be seen?" We would expect John's answer to go something like this: "God the Father reveals himself and his love by means of his Son, Jesus Christ. So if you want to see God, look toward Jesus." But instead, John states, "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." John teaches here that God the Father reveals himself in the loving community of those who follow Jesus. The churches to which he was writing were scattered and fledgling. Yet that is where God chooses to dwell.

Now, the way in which God dwells in the local church is different than the way in which God dwells in Jesus Christ. A local church is transformed into the place where God lives when its members love one another because of their love for Jesus. So God lives in the local church in a secondary sense. It is Jesus Christ who remains the primary way in which God reveals himself.

Nevertheless, John boldly declares that there is a kind of parallel between the dwelling of God in Jesus Christ and the dwelling of God in the local church. The first aspect of that parallel is quite easy for us to affirm. Yes, we believe and know that God revealed himself through our Lord Jesus. But the second aspect of that parallel, that God reveals himself within the local church, would be difficult for us to affirm if we did not have 1 John 4:12, wouldn't it?

Nevertheless if we do not learn to affirm this parallel truth we miss an opportunity to be encouraged. Our church planting is vitally important to God and his mission because he has chosen to dwell in our church plants. And this is true regardless of their size. So be encouraged that little is big, that even small churches can be significant because God dwells within them and wants to reveal himself there. Continue to dream and work toward the day when the Church in Japan will be larger than it is. But in the meantime, remember that small can be significant.

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¹ These thoughts were given in sermon format at Takayama Chapel (Shichigahama Machi, Miyagi Ken) on Aug. 10, 2003. I am indebted to the following article: George Vandervelde, "The Challenge of Evangelical Ecclesiology," *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2003) 27:1, 4-26.