

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Priority of the Word of God in Church Planting

The book of Acts has always been a rich resource for thinking biblically about mission. In 2002, Baker published David Pao's Harvard Ph.D. dissertation, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*. Pao argues that the priority Isaiah placed on the notion of the word of God is a hermeneutical key for understanding Acts. He tells us that the word of God, the *logos*, is the central theme of Acts. The word of God, or the gospel, is used in Acts like a metaphor for God himself. Thus in Acts 13:48 Luke can state that the word of God was glorified.

The word of God displays leadership in Acts. In 6:7, 12:24, and 19:20, the word grew. The word is alive. It is dynamic. The word of God leads in establishing the early church. In 20:32 Paul commends the Ephesian leaders to the word of God. The powerful word of God will mature them in faith, and will reserve for them a future inheritance. Pao suggests that if we chart on a map the geographical occurrences of the word *logos* in Acts in the order they occur, we will see that the *logos* leads in a linear fashion. That is, the word of God does not move in a circular fashion, retracing steps as Paul did in his missionary journeys. Rather, the word of God is like a military general accomplishing a specific mission with unchallenged authority.

This movement of the word of God in Acts is best understood, according to Pao, in the light of Isaiah's focus on the word of God. In Isa. 2:3 the torah will go out from Jerusalem. In Isa. 40:7-8, in a reference to the end times, Isaiah prophesies that the word of God stands forever. According to Isa. 45:22-24 the word of God will reign over the world—every knee will bow before God. The word of God which goes forth from God's mouth in Isa. 55:10-11 achieves its purpose or mission in the book of Acts.

Furthermore, Pao is convinced that Luke's ultimate concern in Acts is the church. Through the leadership of the *logos*, God raises up a people whose function is to witness to the *logos*. So although it is correct to think of the word of God in Christological categories—Jesus is the word of God—the ecclesiological aspect of the word of God must also be recognized.

In sum, Pao argues that the word of God has theological and hermeneutical priority in Acts. In other words, Acts could accurately be called the "Acts of the Word of God." If Pao's thesis is correct, and if it is valid to assume that 21st century church planting ought to bear some resemblance to the founding of 1st century churches described in Acts, at least two implications follow for church planting.

First, the church is born where the word of God has powerfully worked. The church wondrously comes into being in the wake of the dynamic gospel. The word of God calls the church into being, reminiscent of God's words bringing the original creation into existence. Church planting, then, can be viewed as participating in a missional journey led by the word of God.

Second, whatever else church planters do, they must at least proclaim the word of God. Management and strategy are necessary aspects of church planting ministries. Likewise, holistic service to the community can enhance church planting, providing a conducive context for it. But these sort of items cannot be allowed to marginalize gospel proclamation. The core ministry of church planters must be the proclamation of the word of God. Their proclamation seeks an initial salvific response from unbelievers and is the means of growth for believers. This of course means that church planters must grow in their own understanding of the gospel, demonstrating its power and dynamic in their own lives.

May the word of God lead and grow your church plant!

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