

Thinking Theologically About Church Planting: Where is the Church?

This ostensibly simple question seems to be answered in three basic ways in writings on ecclesiology.¹ Contemporary publications about the Church, by the way, appear to be on the increase.² Roman Catholic and Orthodox folks would hold that a church exists where the sacraments are correctly administered by qualified personnel. The broad flow of Protestants could be said to believe that a church exists where there is correct Biblically based teaching. And perhaps, to select one group of Protestants, charismatically oriented believers might hold that a church exists where the Holy Spirit is active.

There are elements of truth in all three of these answers. The salvific death of Jesus should be celebrated in all churches. Correct teaching should be found in any local church. The presence and power of the Spirit should be evident in a local gathering of believers. But it is debatable whether any one of these formulations sufficiently answers the question, “Where is the church?” The answer is apparently not reducible to these solutions. The first answer could be summarized as sacramental, the second as pedagogical, and the third as pneumatic. The shortcoming of these kind of answers is that they marginalize the centrality of Jesus Christ. It is incumbent upon people like church planters who “do church” to more clearly enunciate the Christological base for understanding the Church.

Here baptistic and free church ecclesiologies have a lot to offer missionaries who find themselves, not unlike first century Paul, initiating church plants with a small number of people. Mt. 18:20 is often the starting point for these kind of ecclesiologies: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (NIV) Jesus is present in a special way even among two or three who congregate in his name. There may or may not be qualified clergy present to perform certain functions such as communion (or benedictions!) as God’s mediators—but a church consisting of lay people exists there anyway. There may or may not be a whole lot of teaching taking place—but a church, perhaps not the best, exists there anyway. There may or may not be a palpable sense that the Spirit is powerfully at work—but a church exists there anyway. We can know that a local church exists in those kind of places because Jesus promised to be present with his own children when they gather. If theological exegesis of Mt. 18:20, despite its judicial and legal context, allows us to draw out ecclesiological implications, then it can be argued that the essential ecclesiality of the Church begins with a Christological affirmation. Namely, the local church is found where Jesus Christ graciously offers his presence to those who gather in his name.

It is not surprising that Baptist theologians use Mt. 18:20 in such a way. It is worth noting, however, that Miroslav Volf, now of Yale Divinity School, also takes Mt. 18:20 as paradigmatic for ecclesiology in a postmodern world. For example, Volf categorizes ordained leadership as beneficial but not essential for the local church because the presence of Christ is mediated through the dynamic life of the entire church rather than primarily through ordained offices. He writes that this participative model of ecclesiology rather than a hierarchical or professional model is increasingly exhibited around the globe. He thinks that the churches of the future will mostly be of this variety.³

It can be questioned whether Volf’s analysis, generated from his North American and European perspective, can be applied to churches in Asian societies. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the Christological and ultimately Trinitarian foundation of the Church is an encouragement for church planters working in small congregations. The churches we are planting, though

perhaps small, are blessed by the presence of Jesus Christ. When we congregate, we gather not only with one another, but also with our Lord Jesus Christ. Immanuel!

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¹ For an example see Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1952, 1964).

² For a helpful but irenic introduction to various contemporary ecclesiologies see Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2002).

³ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 12-13, 136, 152.