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A Theology of Church Planting

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abstract

Does church planting need a theology of its own? Or is it enough for it to be informed by theological themes? This paper will attempt to address this conversation. It will show that, even though, church planting may fall outside the realm of traditional theology it is still a branch off the theological trunk. Church planting is an implementation of theological teaching. There are four theological foundations that inform the practice of church planting. They are critical for church planting reflection and framing. These are: *Missio Dei*, Incarnation, Kingdom of God, and Ecclesiology. Each of this will be explored and interacted with as they pertain to church planting initiatives.

A theology of church planting is often assumed, but seldom affirmed. The assumptions manifest in two ways. First, it is assumed that a church planting theology is commonly inferred in writings but not clearly identified. This assumption leaves church planting to dangle on the edge of theological discourse, but never firmly pulled up and over into the theological camp.

Second, it is assumed that church planting has no theological underpinning, but it should be done anyway.

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The seldom-raised question is whether church planting is theological in nature.

An argument against the theological nature of church planting could be made simply by the absence of ink and hours devoted to church planting in the major theological texts, professional journals, and theological classrooms.¹

This assumption can easily render church planting trendy and not an essential for Great Commission fulfillment.

Silence on the subject can indeed make church planting the elephant in the theological room. It is left to lumber throughout while those in the room simply do all they can to get around its looming presence. Could it be that the wrong question is being suggested? The wrong question would be: is there a theology of church planting? The more correct questions might be: can church planting be framed within a theological construct? Can theology give perspective to church planting? Might we be able to reflect on church planting via theological insights? In short, does church planting need a theology to call its own?

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Stuart Murray, Oasis Director of Church Planting and Evangelism at Spurgeon's College in London, would submit that church planting does not need its own theological construction. He argues that church planting lies outside the realm of systematic theology. This is not to say it does not reflect sound theology. Church planting does give a pattern and a face to God and His activity. Most literally, this is theology: *the study of God*. It is the understanding of God as it pertains to His activity with and toward His creation. Theology, therefore, tends toward the bigger swaths of God's activity—Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology to name a few. The topics that are informed by theology are not any less necessary, but may not need a specific theological interaction.

Church planting is a branch off the theological trunk. Theology informs church planting. "Strategy in church planting is strongly influenced and often determined by theological concepts of the basic nature and function of the church."² A sound theological understanding of God, His nature, redemptive activity, and missionary nature motivates church planting. Church planting is an implementation of theological teaching. It is living out the *connectiveness* of God with His creation. It is giving flesh to the redemptive nature of God.

. . . we will not attempt to construct a theology of church planting but instead to reflect theologically on the practice of church planting and inquire whether

¹ Rodney Harrison, Tom Cheyne, Don Overstreet, *Spin-off Churches*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2008), 6.

² Charles Brock, *The Principles and Practices of Indigenous Church Planting*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 18.

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there are theological perspectives that impinge on and might help guide church planting strategies and policies.³

Church planting does not need its own theology, but it does need theology to inform its strategy and structure.

Four theological foundations that inform the practice of church planting are critical for church planting reflection and framing. These are *missio Dei*, Incarnation, kingdom of God, and ecclesiology.

missio dei

The correct understanding of mission and being missional is foundational to a church's willingness to engage the culture in relevant ways.

Local congregations the world over will gain new life and vitality only as they understand the missiological purpose for which they alone exist, the unique culture, people, and needs of their context, and the missionary action through which they alone will discover their own nature as God's people in God's world.⁴

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A primary function of the church is to represent God to our cultures and our societies.

The church has a role as reconcilers and ambassadors. "For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us . . ." (II Cor.5:19–21).

This is the doctrine of *missio Dei*. God is a *missionary God*. God the Father extends Himself into the world through God the Son. God the Son, through God the Spirit, sends the church into the world. David Bosch states it this way:

The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.⁵

The church that lives under the *missio Dei* has an entirely different view of her role in the culture in which it exists.

She is a sent community. She does not merely exist in the world. She is in the world to engage the world. Jesus came into the world as human. He relinquished his godness.

³ Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 38.

⁴ Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 20.

⁵ *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell L. Guder, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

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Though he was God, he did not think equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross (Phil.2:6–8).

The church must relinquish her self-created separateness.

The church was not established to be apart from the world, but to be a sanctifying force in the world. "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one" (John 17:15). As Christ was sent into the world so must the church function under her sent nature, as Newbigin states:

. . . the missionary character of the church, the recognition of the unfinished task which that implies, the confession that the church is a pilgrim people on its way to the ends of the earth and the end of time, and the acknowledgment of the need for a new openness to the world into which the church is sent.⁶

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This sent activity changes how the church acts, ministers, relates and addresses the world.

A church on mission, or as a missionary people, will contextualize the message of Christ in the culture to which it is called. A church on mission will not expect the culture to adapt to it, but it will adapt to the culture. This adaptation is not compromise, it is contextualizing. Compromise is lessening the gospel. Compromise is not demanding what Christ demands. Compromise is not confronting societal injustice. Compromise is a refusal to be the active presence of Christ in the world.

Contextualization is taking the core doctrines of the church, the redemptive activity of Christ in the world, and the reality of God's kingdom, and presenting it in a manner the culture can understand. "Missionary congregations open to their environment will intentionally create those perspectives, attitudes, priorities, goals, plans, and activities which will aid them in interacting with their context in purification and preservation of truth, justice, equality, faith, hope, and love."⁷

Missionary congregations will interact with the world in a missional way. "Missional is about a way of 'being' the church in the world."⁸

A proper understanding of missional begins with recovering a missionary understanding of God. By his very nature God is a "sent one" who takes the initiative to redeem his creation. This doctrine, known as *missio Dei*—the

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 1.

⁷ Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, 135.

⁸ Reggie McNeal, *REV! Magazine*, "Catching the Missional Wave," (Loveland, CO: Group Publishers, March/April 2009), 25.

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sending of God—is causing many to redefine their understanding of the church. Because we are the “sent” people of God, the church is the instrument of God’s mission to the world.⁹

Missional churches partner with God in His redemptive activity. Missional churches engage in intentional activity to go into the world and connect it to Christ. Missional churches participate in the ministry of Jesus to the world. Missional churches live out the incarnational presence of Christ in the world. Missional churches go into the culture to engage the culture in order to connect people to Christ. Missional churches exemplify Great Commission living (go and make) with a Great Commandment heart (love your neighbor). Missional churches are transformational communities of faith. Missional churches understand that like yeast, they must mingle in the dough of the world if change is going to happen. Missional communities of faith live out the *missio Dei*.

Such churches will expand beyond the attractational style of reaching the world and transition to deployment. Leaders are not raised up as keepers of the house; instead, they are raised up to be kingdom expanders. “These missional followers of Jesus then serve as the church deployed across all domains of culture.”¹⁰

A missional community is patterned after what God has done in Jesus Christ. In the incarnation God sent his Son. Similarly, to be missional means to be sent into the world; we do not expect people to come to us. This posture differentiates a missional church from an attractational church.¹¹

This deployment mentality cannot help but result in churches being planted.

When a church views, as a primary function, the sending of followers into the cultural domains, churches will be started where conversions are happening. Church planting is an effective method of engaging the unchurched culture. “Church planting is effective when leaders make a decision to engage an unchurched world with a radical message: the gospel.”¹² Stetzer states, “Without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission.”¹³

Great Co-missional churches are needed. Great Co-missional churches understand their missionary nature. They are motivated by going and making. These churches relentlessly exegete culture and do everything to effectively engage the culture. These churches mobilize Christ followers to be the incarnational presence of Christ in their daily lives. Teams of followers are sent out to start biblically sound and culturally relevant churches. A Great Co-missional church is

⁹ Alan Hirsch, *Leadership Journal*, “Defining Missional,” (Fall 2008), 22.

¹⁰ McNeal, “Catching the Missional Wave,” 25.

¹¹ Hirsch, “Defining Missional,” 22.

¹² Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 2, Iss. 2 [2011], Art. 7 not satisfied with starting one church; they desire to see a church planting movement. “Church planting should not end with the establishment of one church. The process can repeat itself when a new church matures to the point of becoming a sponsoring church. The kingdom is best advanced through multiplication not just addition.”¹⁴

incarnation

The Incarnation is God dwelling among us. “So the Word became human and made his home among us . . .” (John 1:14). God stepped into humanity. He initiated contact. The Creator became the creation. He mingled Himself with us. The eternal God became temporal so as to draw all humanity to Him.

The incarnational aspect of God was for a three year span. Jesus would leave and return to the Father. “But now I am going away to the One who sent me . . .” (John 16:5).

. . . it is best for you that I go away, because if I don’t, the Advocate won’t come, if I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment (John 16:7–8).

In His departure, He will equip His followers to be the incarnational presence of God.

It was in His going that He gave them the Great Commission (Matt.28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47). With His anointing and empowering, they went and became that presence. “And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked through them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs” (Mark 16:20). It is through the community of believers (the church), that the incarnational presence of God continues to be established. “It is primarily at the level of the local church that the logos is incarnate—the Word becomes flesh—that the Christian faith becomes manifest and operative in the lives of people and society.”¹⁵

The theological construct of the Incarnation informs church planting. Recognizing that the church is the presence of God in a community, there will be a desire to establish God’s presence where it is lacking.

The word which had been made flesh uniquely in Jesus would be proclaimed not only by the individual messengers but through incarnation in these new churches. The description of the church as the “body of Christ” provides a

¹⁴ Ibid., 316.

¹⁵ Ezra Earl Jones, *Strategies for New Churches*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), 29.

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secure biblical foundation for applying . . . the language of incarnation to the church.¹⁶

The establishment of God's presence in communities happens best through the starting of new churches.

Church leaders must take seriously the local church as the incarnational presence of God in the world. Stock must be taken of congregations that exist in communities. It must be noted if they are genuinely representing the gospel. Each church must be evaluated as to its effectiveness in living out the reality of Christ in a manner that makes sense to those it is to reach. Churches must be viewed through an incarnational lens. Are they living for themselves, or are they living for Christ in the community?

Introverted or socially isolated churches, churches concerned only with their own spiritual development, churches with nothing to communicate to their neighbors, churches speaking in terminology that cannot be understood, churches that speak much but do little, churches that fail to incarnate what they are proclaiming, may be making no positive contribution to *missio Dei*.¹⁷

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In communities where churches already exist, but are not living out the incarnational presence, there too churches must be planted!

the kingdom of god

The kingdom of God was central to the message and ministry of Jesus. “. . . The Kingdom of God is near . . .” (Mark 1:15). The kingdom's proximity demanded repentance of sins and belief in the Good News (Mark 1:15, Matthew 5:17). The kingdom proximity was reiterated in Luke when Jesus proclaimed: “. . . The Kingdom of God can't be detected by visible signs. You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' Or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you” (Luke 17:20–21). Jesus appeared to be revealing that His presence and activity in the world was the bursting forth of the kingdom. The kingdom was upon them. It was active. It was present. It was not merely a future realization, but a present reality.

In its contemporary activity, the kingdom invades all domains. The kingdom cannot be confined to religious institutions or any one church building. Like yeast, it influences all that it touches. “. . . The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough” (Matthew 13:33).

¹⁶ Murray, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

foothold in a community, but soon permeates the whole of the community.

If they are functioning properly, churches will be agents of the kingdom, signposts to the kingdom, sacraments of the kingdom, provisional representations of the kingdom, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom, pointing to what is coming when the kingdom is fully established. . . .¹⁸

The activity of the church is the activity of the kingdom. It brings mercy, justice, forgiveness, and restoration.

Church planting, informed by kingdom theology, will be pursued vigorously as each new church is a kingdom outpost. Church planting, informed by kingdom theology, will structure itself to be missional in nature, incarnational in ministry, and active in participation. People must be aware the kingdom is present. Rightly planted churches will bring this awareness.

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ecclesiology

What is the church? Typically it is thought of in terms of location, specifically a building. A church is definitely a location. Paul in his letters addressed specific churches. “. . . I am writing to all of God’s holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus . . .” (Phil. 1:1). It is much more than location, however. It is a spiritual entity earmarked by vibrancy and life. “You are coming to Christ who is the living cornerstone of God’s temple . . . And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple . . .” (I Peter 2:4–5).

In the New Testament, the word church comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning called out or assembled. In Classical Greek, the word was used for almost exclusively for political gathering. In the New Testament it means the community of God’s people created by God’s rule in Christ.¹⁹

We can surmise that the church is a community of people in a particular location connected to Christ and one another. The church has been called out, unified, and formed into the image of Christ. It is both visible (a called out assembly), and invisible (spiritual temple). The church exists in time, but it is for all time. The church is both a physical entity and a spiritual force.

This may be what the church is, but what does the church do? The church acts in community, participating in worship, teaching, prayer, and evangelism (Acts 2:42–47).

¹⁸ Murray, 47.

¹⁹ Fred Herron, *Expanding God’s Kingdom through Church Planting*, (New York: Writer’s Showcase, 2003), 22–23.

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The early church fulfilled the Great Commission by planting churches. The first believers heard the commission, left their homes, and went out to plant.

When we hear the Great Commission, we should also be motivated to go out and plant new congregations.²⁰

The church is the empowered instrument that God uses to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). The church is a witnessing community that is charged to move throughout the region and beyond telling about Jesus (Acts 1:8). The church is not just for itself, but for the manifestation of the kingdom.

The church is not simply a gathering of well-meaning individuals who have entered into a social contract to meet their privately defined self-interests. It is, instead, an intentional and disciplined community of witnessing to the power and the presence of God's reign.²¹

The church is the living, active presence of Christ, taking His life-changing message to all corners of the world.

An informed ecclesiology impacts the why and how churches are planted.

“Your view of what a church is and what it does (ecclesiology) has a profound impact on your approach to church planting.”²² Viewing the church as a vibrant, influencing, gospel-spreading force compels us to start more such communities of faith. Church planting makes sense within the construct of an ecclesiology that embraces its representation of God's kingdom in the world.

Charles Chaney in his book, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, identifies a threefold ministry for the church: evangelization, building up the body, and worship. The first is the key to the second and third. Apart from the church fulfilling its role as an evangelizing force, no other role the church has is effectively attained. “In church planting, we are primarily concerned with the ministry directed toward the world . . . if that purpose is not fulfilled, the church cannot adequately fulfill the other the purposes.”²³

Church planting is an essential component of living out a reliable ecclesiology. A reliable ecclesiology moves beyond one local church and projects out into more and more vibrant faith communities. Charles Van Engen states, “Local churches are, rather, the instruments of something much greater than themselves: They are tools of the kingdom of God.”²⁴ The church that multiplies gives the fullest expression of the Christian community as God intends. “Constantly reproducing

²⁰ Stetzer, 36.

²¹ *Missional Church*, 159.

²² Tim Chester, *Multiplying Churches*, “Church Planting: A Theological Perspective”, editor: Stephen Timmis, (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian focus Publications, 2000), 23.

²³ Charles Chaney, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1991), 11.

²⁴ Herron, 27.

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churches was the pattern of apostolic churches, but it was also a pattern that gave fullest expression to the principles of Christian community.”²⁵

The theological categories of *missio Dei*, Incarnation, kingdom of God, and ecclesiology inform and frame church planting. Church planting is a means by which there is a theological expression. Church planting is how the mission of God is carried out through the church as an incarnational presence of Christ and the kingdom He came proclaiming. “Where church planting is accepted as one of the means by which this mission is fulfilled, the multiplication of worshipping communities completes the circle: the church, as an expression of its worship, establishes a new community of worshippers.”²⁶

Church planting is primarily an evangelistic methodology. It is in the starting of new, culturally relevant, and biblically sound communities of faith that the kingdom of God infiltrates a culture. Church leaders who rally their congregations to this work contribute greatly to the expansion of God’s kingdom. Congregations who participate in the planting of multiplying faith communities more effectively bring about the incarnational presence of Christ. Congregations who participate in this multiplying work are joining God on His mission of sending. Jesus was sent. We are sent. We need to also send! “The Great Commission calls us to evangelize and to congregationalize.”²⁷ This is the essence of church planting theology.

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²⁵ Chester, 40.

²⁶ Murray, 59.

²⁷ Stetzer, 33.