

Why Plant Churches As A Missionary Strategy? Preston Graham

As a strategic plan, Mission Anabaino is mission church planting! But why? This is because we believe that local, Christ-centered and apostolically designed churches are the very epicenter of Christ's saving presence on earth "against which even the gates of hell will not prevail" (Matthew 16:18)!

Church Planting Is An Effective Mission Strategy

To be sure, as a practical plan, both those who have studied the issue of Christian mission and church revitalization have concluded with Tim Keller that

the vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for 1) the numerical growth of the Body of Christ and 2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of existing churches. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, growing mega-churches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. 1

Keller's thoughts are based on studies supporting the simple conclusion that new churches best reach new generations, new residents, new socio-cultural people groups and the unchurched. The reasons often noted are understandable if not always obvious to those who attend existing churches.

First, it takes no more than five or so years before "cultural hegemony" begins to set in to the life of a church—when a particular kind of socio-cultural "flesh" becomes the unspoken, if not always discerned, dominant and unchallenged culture of a church. This can be expressed in all sorts of ways: in time of worship, worship length, the way a congregation responds to emotionalism or intellectualism (as feeling manipulated or enlivened by one or the other), degrees of scriptedness in worship, leadership styles, aesthetic surroundings, location, what life experiences and illustrations are expressed—thousands of tiny customs and mores that reflect the natural "flesh" of one or another cultural expression that makes the gospel more or less accessible to a given people group.

Second, Church planting is good strategy if by the very fact that it's viability is dependent on becoming more accessible and responsive to an under-reached group that feels alienated and perhaps even manipulated or oppressed by the cultural hegemony of an existing church.

And third, perhaps less obvious, it can also be shown in practical terms that church planting is one of the very best ways to revitalize an established "mother" church. New churches stimulate new and progressive ideas and strategies, serve as a breeding ground for leadership development, create contexts for critical self examination in discriminating between the truly sacred "first things" of Christian faith and practice and the "second things" that can too easily overshadow the first things to the demise of spiritual vitality in a church. Churches, like all associations, are prone to stagnation and self-absorption once the fear of foreclosure is no longer an issue.

A church committed to church planting, like all birth ordeals, require a loss of some comforts and preferences as part of giving life to another in ways that are commensurate with sanctification and spiritual renewal. It would be a great mistake to pit church planting against church renewal or concern for existing churches. The kind of spiritual DNA that makes a church into a church planting movement is the same kind of Christ-centered and mission-minded DNA that breeds healthy Christians and churches.

And so we concur that church planting as a philosophy of ministry, is the most practically effective strategy for both mission and church revitalization.

But here is the thing: *even if there was absolutely no evidence as to the practical advantages of church planting, we would do it anyway!* We would do it as with a wholehearted passion fit only for a simple and pure devotion to Christ himself in response to a theological vision of Christology applied to mission. For at the heart of church planting, is the belief that to plant a church is to plant the mediatorial and salvific presence of Christ! That is to

say that the church, more than a mere source or strategy for mission, is by her very nature a *locus* of mission and therefore is ordinarily an essential element of the gospel! A bold statement, to be sure, which awaits some Biblical justification—so here it is:

Church Planting Is Christology Applied to Mission

The mandate for church planting can readily be illustrated with a simple reading of Matthew's version of the great commission (Mt. 28:18-20) in context with Matthew's description of Christ's ascension ministry (16:18-19).

We see for instance how the missional call to "make disciples" is not just a call to share faith and make learners by "teaching them," but by "baptizing them" into the "binding and loosing" ministry of Christ "on earth as in heaven." Baptism in Acts and throughout the apostolic ministry is clearly portrayed as an efficacious ("by") entrance into a carefully designed community based on the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph. 1:21ff). To be baptized is to be engrafted into the very body of Christ and participate in Christ's baptism through death into eternal life (Rom 6). The church as such is the epi-center of the kingdom of God in Matthew 16.

The Church Is Christ's Temple PRESENCE

But even more compelling is the theological vision that informs John gospel concerning the "greater things" envisioned during Christ's ascension ministry by means of a continued temple presence of Christ today!

According to John, the great commission reads like this:

Just as the father has sent me, so also I am sending you [plural]" (John 20:21).

The "just as...so" way of framing the commission was of course meant to remember how the Father sent Christ. This was made perfectly clear in John's introduction:

The Word [Christ's Divinity] became flesh [Christ's humanity] and temped among us (John 1:14).

This passage loomed large in the counsel of Chalcedon's understanding of the mystery concerning Christ's divinity in relation to Christ's humanity. The result was the ancient Christological formulation that the two natures of Christ (divine and human) are at once "distinct but never separate!" This formula informs our theological understanding of the church as the very "temple" presence of Christ during the interim period of redemptive history during his ascension ministry.

In the church, Christ's divinity (Word) is at once distinct, but never separate from the human socio-cultural flesh of Christ's body (temple) which is now located in every place and time that a church exists as patterned after the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone!

John was writing to Jewish Christians who were suffering under growing persecution and a sense of homelessness with the demise of the temple in around AD 70. John's message to them was clear: you are not without the temple. Christ IS your temple and Christ is STILL with you—not abstractly as an idea but actually AS THE WORD FLESHED OUT TODAY after the pattern of Christ first advent even! Following then his introduction to Christ as our temple in John 1:14, John continues this theme throughout his narrative.

In just the second chapter, we hear Jesus say such things as "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19-20 speaking of the resurrection). John proceeds to carefully construct his narrative in a way that draws attention to Christ self-revelation within the context of the great temple feasts. For instance, while celebrating the Passover, Jesus is proclaimed to be the true bread from heaven (6:35ff). While celebrating the feast of the tabernacles, Jesus is proclaimed to be the true light of the world (8:12ff). During the feast of temple dedication that celebrated the reconstruction of the temple in 164BC, Jesus is proclaimed to be the consecrated one (10:36ff)—all images of the Old Testament temple now "in Christ" fulfilled! But the real climax for John's gospel was not the death and resurrection of Christ, but His ascension!

Almost a third of John's gospel (starting in John 14) focuses on Christ preparing the disciples for his ascension ministry related to Christ's temple advent today! His ministry is described as being STILL present on earth albeit spiritually by the Holy Spirit being incorporated into temple churches.

For instance, about the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus in the mystery of Trinity can speak in the first person that:

I will not leave you as orphans for I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and [also] you [p] in me, and I in you [pl].

This is extraordinary language that speaks to the mystery of Christology itself applied to Christ's present ministry on earth by the Holy Spirit! And Jesus further explains how in this coming, "I will make my home with you" (14:18-23, language that is clearly reminiscent of their temple home-- the Old Testament concept of the "House of God").

About then his ascension ministry, Christ told his disciples that they could expect to see "greater things even... because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Clearly, the "greater things" pertains to the great commission with respect to Christ's NOW temple presence throughout the world in myriads of socio-geographical contexts and at the same time. It can be said that Christ has an address, and it is everywhere a congregation is formed in worship upon the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone!

To this point, a poignant moment was when Mary is tempted to cling to Christ's resurrected body as if unwilling to let go of Christ's first advent. In light of Christ's Pentecostal advent, Christ gently rebukes her saying, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended... go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father'" (John 20:17). This then was the context for Christ's great commission in John 20:21!

In other words, it is as if Jesus was saying, "don't revert to a kind of memorial only kind of spirituality with respect to just remembering the "good ole days" of my first advent." Christ was saying, in effect, "I am not really leaving you but am in fact preparing for the greater things of multiplying my temple presence on earth wherever you (plural) are sent after the same pattern that I was sent by the father—as temple presence!

This all leads to the so called "priestly (temple)" prayer in John 17... wherein he concludes:

21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

This is extraordinary language that speaks to the mystery of Christology applied to Christ's present ministry on earth by the Holy Spirit even as he is with the Father in heaven! And it makes sense of Christ's earlier correction to Mary concerning a desire to cling to Christ's single-formed incarnational presence in light of the "greater" multi-formed presence planned for Christ's ascension ministry.

This all sets up John's amazing rendition of the "great commission." In vs. 21ff as carefully within the context of a CONTINUED temple of Christ's presence! The commission goes like this:

Temple Benediction: "Peace be with you."

Temple Commission: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

Temple Power: "And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (c.f. 1:33)

Temple Absolution: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (c.f. Mt 16)

Clearly then, as noted by Mary Coloe, "the temple is not a peripheral image. It is used consistently throughout the text and moves beyond the life of Jesus into the life of the community, giving the community a clear sense of identity and a way of sustaining faith in the absence of Jesus.:

Conclusion: The Church as the Presence of a New Salvific Reality

This then is the reason why we plant churches! Simply stated, we plant churches because the mission of God is fulfilled in the reality of Christ's presence on earth, even as Christ's presence now during his ascension ministry is by means of a mediated(temple) presence vis-a-vis the church, the body of Christ, wherein Christ fills all in all (Eph 1:23).

"Missional theology" as such will put emphasis on the fundamentally missionary nature of the church over against the church that does "missions" as one of many programs within the church. For instance, Darrel Guder once noted how "it is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power..." as then mediated in, with and through the visible church of Christ.

The church then is missionary by its very nature! It is a realization that more than just declaring Christ, Christian mission is about the mediatorial presence of Christ to make it happen, even believing that the local, carefully designed church patterned after the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone IS the very real, vivifying, presence of Christ on earth as Christ is in heaven!

For this reason, Paul made it his ambition to plant churches wherever the church was not accessible—albeit geographically or culturally (Rom. 15). We can say that every time a church designed upon the apostolic foundation with Christ as the corner stone is planted, Christ is in the mystery of Christology applied "re-templed" among us as to again and again and again make the ONE Christ who is with the Father in heaven accessible to the myriads of "flesh" on earth!

Summary

if Christ's first incarnational coming was in the mystery of supernatural conception, his present coming after Pentecost is in the mystery of supernatural incorporation via His advent by the Holy Spirit built church. The church is according to Paul nothing short of "the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills all in all?" It is the "household of God... a holy temple... a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" but only in so far as it is a community carefully designed, (yes organized) upon the architectural pattern of the "apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone" (c.f Eph. 1:22-23, 2:19-21, 1 Tim. 3:14-15)?

To plant a church is to participate in Christ advent today! And wherever there is the advent of Christ, there is a great manifestation of transformative grace unequalled in power in comparison to any other! From the vantage of Christology applied, we believe there really is no greater legacy that a Christian could desire than to participate in Christ's advent today both through his continued advent in an existing churches but most especially in church planting. This is why we embark on an ambitious vision called "Mission Anabaino!" In the words of Lesslie Newbigin:

Just as we insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so must we also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate. An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.

[1] Tim Keller, *Why Plant Churches* (Feb 2002). Cf. D. McGavran and G. Hunter, *Church: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), C. Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist*

Convention (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), Lyle Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

[2]Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 147.