

QOHELET WEB MINISTRY

ECCLESIOLOGY AND MISSION:
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH
AS IT RELATES TO CHURCH PLANTING

BY JOHN TELGREN

This very brief research paper is intended to be the start of a reflection on a biblical ecclesiology and its relationship to mission. Other ecclesiological works have at times emphasized the institutional aspects of the church such as organization, leadership, and other forms.¹ Reflecting specifically on the book of Ephesians and 1 Peter, this paper will draw some big picture implications as to the nature of the church in regard to the mission of God.

Ephesians and 1 Peter both have some common elements that contribute to an Ecclesiology that employs the metaphor of a living building. This metaphor offers some significant insight into the nature of the church, her purpose, and her goal.

The first part of Ephesians 2 describes the basis of the church. Through the resurrection of Christ, God raised up the church and places it in the "heavenlies." The church is not of this world, yet is in the world to show the "incomparable riches of his grace" (Eph 2:7). The church is "his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). Therefore, the church has been part of God's ongoing plan to do good works and demonstrate the grace of God in a broken world.

The second part of the chapter describes the make up of the church. Through his self-sacrifice, Jesus has formed the church into a reconciled body made up of a reconstituted Israel that now includes gentiles. Jesus is the "peace" that unites people of all races and backgrounds into one people (Eph 2:14-15). The result is a new people, "fellow citizen's with Gods' people and member's of God's household" (Eph 2:19). This is a new family that is tied together not by

¹ Examples include, Roy Cogdill, *The New Testament Church* (Port Arthur, TX: O.C. Lambert and Sons Publishers, 1938). and, Edward C. Wharton, *The Church of Christ: A Practical Guideline Course By Which the New Testament Church Can Be Identified and Established Anywhere on Earth* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishers, 1970). Some of the more recent ecclesiological work is more balanced, such as, Eddie Cloer, *God's Design for the Church* (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 1993). and, Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

ethnicity, nationality, language, or culture, but through Christ. His blood destroyed the dividing wall and the hostility (Eph 2:14), and brought near those who were far off (Eph 2:13).

The final image in this chapter uses the building analogy. Jesus is the "cornerstone" of this new building, this new people (Eph 2:20). The whole building is being joined together and grows as a temple for the Lord (Eph 2:21). In other words, the church, the people of God is a living dwelling for God. A temple, or sanctuary is a holy place where people meet God.

In 1 Peter 2:4-11, there is a similar image for the church. It refers to "living stones" in the house of God. It begins with the ultimate and first living stone, or the "cornerstone," Jesus Christ. He is the example, the first stone, or the cornerstone. Proceeding from him, the church is comprised of "living stones" that are in the process of being built up into a "spiritual house" to be a "holy priesthood." As a priesthood, the people of God function to bring a lost world to God.

Another element in this image is conflict. Jesus, the "cornerstone" is precious only to those who believe. It causes unbelievers to stumble. It is offensive to them. The living stones that proceed from the cornerstone may also be offensive. By nature, each individual stone is "holy," which carries the idea of being *different* due to being a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9). As a result, the church is to view herself as "strangers and aliens in the world" (1 Pet 2:11). She is to refrain from sinful desires and be an example of goodness to the pagans.

Part of the purpose of the church is to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9), and to be such an example that the pagans will see the church's good deeds and "glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12).

From these passages, several elements of an Ecclesiology emerge. First is that the church exists through God's action. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God called the church

out of the world and into the "heavenlies" in order to carry out his priestly purpose to the world. The church is the dead and resurrected people of God that exists to serve God and his redemptive purposes in the world.

A second element is what I might call the new ethnicity or the new nationality. Collectively, the people in the church derive a new identity as the people of God. This identity transcends ethnic, national, political, social, and economic boundaries. Whether rich or poor, whether Jew or Gentile, whether slave or free, all are partners in a reconstituted people of God based on the death and resurrection of Christ. The people of God intersects with all kinds of peoples of all nations and backgrounds and forms a distinct identity in Christ. This means that the church is culturally relevant. It can communicate to people of all cultures and backgrounds and form a distinct identity within that culture, retaining some aspects of it that are good and godly and transforming other aspects which are not compatible with God's values.

A third element has to do with the image of the temple. The people of God are collectively the house or temple of God. The people of God perform a priestly function. This image comes from passages such as Exodus 19 that identifies the people of God as a "kingdom of priests" through their worship of Yahweh, their devotion to Him, and the way they treated their neighbors. In a similar way, God's people through their excellent behavior among the gentiles, through their declaring the praises of God who called them out of darkness into light, are performing a priestly function by drawing people to God. Since the sanctuary where a broken world can meet God is no longer in a building but in a people, the church is, in a sense, the *temple on the move*. Wherever the people of God are, there are also the living stones in the temple of God. Being culturally relevant, the living temple may use images, language, and

symbols that will communicate most effectively in whatever culture she finds herself in so that people will receive the message of God in a way that they can understand and respond to.

Part of the image of the temple involved the activity of building. This means that the people of God as a temple are an unfinished work. There is always a process of building, additions, and growth in the temple. The people of God are never a completed project because the process of spiritual formation and discipleship is ongoing.

The image of a temple fits nicely with the priestly image of the church whose purpose is to bring people to God. It also fits with the element of the new ethnicity that includes every tongue, culture, and nationality. Jesus came to earth as a human being in the flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). Literally, the text says he "tabernacled" among us. The image is of the presence of God dwelling in a sanctuary on the move with his people in the wilderness. The glory of God traveled with his people wherever they went. Jesus is the glory of God in the flesh and he became the sanctuary on the move. Though he existed previously as God, he came to earth as a Jew male in a particular place, speaking a particular language and participating in a particular culture. In his "becoming flesh," he lived with the people as one of the people and identified with them on their level so that they could see the glory of God in a new way through him. In the same way, the church as the sanctuary, or the "temple on the move," demonstrates the glory of God by identifying with the people they live among so that they can see the glory of God in a way that is more intelligible and will perhaps be redeemed to God.

A fourth element is conflict. Since the church exists both in the "heavenlies" with Christ and in the world as a holy nation in herself, her values, view of the world, practices, and beliefs stand in contrast with the world. Marginalization is a reality the church must come to terms with. The church needs to view herself as strangers, aliens, and exiles in a strange land. She

lives according to a different order and marches to the beat of a different king. She is part of the Kingdom of God which transcends both place and time. This will inevitably place her in conflict with the Kingdom of this world. Therefore, the church should never think that it is a strange thing that she is marginalized, or that she is doing something wrong when outsiders persecute her. If they persecuted and marginalized the king, then they will do the same to the subjects of the king. The church is to resist the temptation of syncretism as she continues her priestly function.

For church planting, the implications of these elements are clear. First of all, this means that church planters and mentors need to realize that this is not about starting a new organization or institution, but about participating the redemptive purposes of God. Church planters are not initiating something new by their own ingenuity, but are participating in what God has already been doing from the very beginning. The Kingdom of God is a creation of God, not of man. Constant prayer, humility, wisdom, and perspective through God's eyes are a must.

Second, church planting needs to take into consideration the culture, background, history, and values of the community in which church planting will take place. Since the church is culturally relevant, church planters need to take into consideration how the message, values, and perspectives of the Kingdom of God will intersect with the message, values, and perspectives of the receiving culture. There will be aspects of the receiving culture that are not in opposition to the perspectives of the Kingdom. There will also be aspects that are in direct opposition to the perspectives of the Kingdom. The church can work within some of these aspects of the culture, and will transform other parts of it that are in opposition to God.

In a place like southern Leavenworth county in Kansas, particularly in Tonganoxie, there is a growing population of families with children, young professionals, and people who live in

multiple worlds as the work in the city, drive an hour to work, and participate in civic activities in their communities. There is not a strong sense of roots yet in the communities. These people are concerned for their families, which is one reason why they have moved to where they are living. They want a sense of safety and predictability that living in a smaller town would provide. Many are not opposed to religion, but are ambivalent toward it. Other than weddings or funerals and perhaps their children's attendance at a VBS, most do not give a whole lot of thought to organized religion. There does not seem to be a deep sense of history among many people. However, there are long-time residents in the older parts of town that have more of a sense of history.

Much of this comes from conversations with people and therefore is not very scientific and perhaps anecdotal. Looking at hard statistics about the make up of the community economically, religiously, socially, etc. might help give a better overall picture. This picture would be somewhat shallow though. Getting involved in the lives of people from various walks of life while observing and talking about their goals, fears, values, and other perspectives will help give a clearer picture of how the Kingdom will intersect their lives and how it can be culturally relevant.

From what little information there is in this paper about this community, one of the ways to begin might be to come alongside people and talk about their concerns, goals, and even their fears concerning family life and the future of their children. This can lead naturally into the Gospel and the message of the Kingdom. God does have something to say to every context and every culture. In this case, it has to do with family, jobs, career, future goals, what living in a small community means, challenges, and things of this nature. Moving from this, which may be central in the eyes of the residents of the community but more on the periphery in God's eyes,

church planters and Christians can move to what is central, which is the saving, transforming Gospel of Christ. Newly planted congregations can be building lives on the foundation of the Gospel and continue to participate in God's redemptive purposes with relevance.

FOR FURTHER READING

Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991.

Guder, Darrell L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North American*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.

Harris, R. Geoffrey. *Mission in the Gospels*. London: Epworth Press, 2004.

Stetzer, Ed. *Planting Missional Churches*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006.