Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 33 · Number 4 · October 2009

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2009) 33:4, 316-331

The Place of Church Planting in Mission: Towards a Theological Framework

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KEYWORDS: *Church planting; Missio Dei; Kingdom of God; Holistic Mission; Theology of Mission*

I The Need for a Theological Framework

Until 1980, there were very few books giving practical guidance to church planters. The succeeding years have seen this vital need met through the publication of scores of texts. Very few of these texts, though, provide anything approaching a satisfying theological basis for church planting, one notable exception being Stuart Murray's *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*, first published in 1998.[1]

The biblical and theological foundation for the planting of churches has generally been assumed rather than explicitly articulated. As Van Rheenen points out, 'theological reflection is the beginning point of ministry formation.'[2] While insights from the history of mission and the social sciences are extremely helpful in shaping church planting practice, a biblical and theological foundation is essential if church planting is to fulfil God's purposes for it. Robinson and Christine are right in insisting that 'we need to be sure that the activity of church planting lies not just on the practical agenda of activists but that it also belongs to the purpose and call of God for his church.'[3] Murray warns:

> An inadequate theological basis [for church planting] will not necessarily hinder short-term growth, or result in widespread heresy among newly planted churches. But it will limit the long-term impact of church planting, and may result in dangerous distortions of the way in which the mission of the church is understood.[4]

Malphurs provides this helpful definition of church planting: 'a planned process of beginning and growing new local churches.'[5] Inherent in his definition are three key concepts: (1) Church planting is an intentional activity which involves human planning; (2) church planting is a dynamic process; (3) church planting involves both starting new churches and helping those churches grow.

This article sets out firstly to survey the perspectives of evangelical scholars on church planting, especially over the past fifty years. These perspectives will be arranged topically so that the major themes are highlighted. The second objective of this paper is to evaluate the themes that emerge from the 'conversation' in the literature, and through this process to highlight themes that promise to be significant contributions to a biblical and theological framework for church planting practice, and attempt to integrate them.

II Historical Perspectives on Church Planting in Mission

David Bosch notes a shift took place at the end of the first century from the mobile ministry of the apostles, prophets, and evangelists of the first century, to the more settled ministry of bishops, elders and deacons. This, he believes, led to the church focusing in on itself. The central concern of mission activity in both the Eastern Church and the Roman Church became the planting and growth of the Church, with the emphasis on Church as institution. Expansion of the Church was often was achieved through coercion, and the words 'compel them to come in' (Lk. 14:26) became the paradigmatic text of the medieval Catholic Church.[6]

Thomas Aquinas wrote that 'the purpose of mission is to so thoroughly root the church… in the various cultures and societies that it serves as an instrument to salvation and good.'[7] Catholic missiologists of the Louvain and Munster schools continued to emphasise church planting, the Louvain school still focusing on the church as institution, and the Munster school taking a more person-centred view. This influence is reflected in the Second Vatican Council's decree on mission, *Ad Gentes*, which describes the goal of mission as 'to preach the Gospel and plant the Church among peoples or groups in which it has not

1 Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

2 Gailyn Van Rheenen, 'The Missional Helix: Example of Church Planting', *Monthly Missiological Reflections* 26 (January 2001), http://www.missiology.org/mmr/mmr26.htm (accessed 21 May 2003).

3 Martin Robinson and Stuart Christine, *Planting Tomorrow's Churches Today: A Comprehensive Handbook* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992), 15.

4 Murray, *Church Planting*, 30.

5 Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 21.

6 David Bosch. *Transforming Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 236

7 Cited in Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, trans. Dale Cooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 182.

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yet been established.'[8]

The Catholic focus on church planting follows naturally from Catholic theology, which was shaped by Cyprian of Carthage's statement, '… *salus extra ecclesiam non est*….,' i.e., there is no salvation outside the Church.[9] This came to be interpreted in terms of the Catholic Church.[10] Augustine of Hippo pointed to the central purpose of Roman Catholic mission when he responded to another bishop that the world was not about to end because first, '… in nations where the Church does not yet exist, she must come into existence.'[11] Since the Church is the administrator of the sacraments, and the sacraments are seen as the means of grace, Catholic theology maintained that salvation was only available to people who were within reach of a local church. Church planting has thus remained the primary goal of Catholic mission thinking through the centuries.

Following the Reformation in the 16th century, Gisbertus Voetius, a missionary and mission theologian, in his *Politica Ecclesiastica*, stated a sevenfold purpose of mission, six aspects of which were directly connected to the planting and growth of churches. Examples include the planting, growing, and establishment of churches, the regathering of scattered churches, the reunification and reincorporation of divided or separated churches, and the support of oppressed or impoverished churches.[12]

Very little cross-cultural missionary work was engaged in by Protestants until the Pietistic movement began. Pietism, being a movement within state churches, rather than a specific branch of the church itself, did not emphasise church planting, but rather individual salvation. The primary aim and overriding focus of Pietist missionaries was the conversion of individuals, even though churches were planted through them.[13] William Carey and the many non-denominational missionary societies arising from his example also saw mission primarily as the conversion of individuals, and thus they attached little importance to outward and organizational forms of church life.[14]

These early missionaries were not much concerned with establishing indigenous national churches for several reasons: (1) The Enlightenment view that separated spiritual concerns from the material and practical realm, and in which religion was seen as the private concern of the individual;[15] (2) the prevailing materialism, which led missionaries to believe they were superior and the assumption they would need to remain there indefinitely to provide education and material goods;[16] and (3) the influence of pietism, which had a highly spiritualised concept of the church and attached little importance to its visible form and ministry.[17]

This is not to say that church planting was entirely missing from the agenda of these early Protestant missionaries. William Ward, one of the Serampore trio together with Carey, wrote in his journal of 1805 'that in planting separate churches native pastors shall be chosen… and that the missionaries shall preserve their original character, giving themselves up to the planting of new churches and superintending those already planted'[18] The felt need to establish churches for the majority of missionaries, however, grew out of the immediate question of what to do with converts rather than as part of a deliberate focus.

This changed in the second half of the 19th century, when denominational agencies reacted to the relativizing tendencies of the Enlightenment, and began to define mission primarily as church planting. The nondenominational societies had been preaching a gospel without a church, but this was now seen as inadequate, and the remedy was to plant denominational churches which were self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.[19] In the middle of this century, the three-self formula of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson helped to crystallise the focus among evangelicals on church planting as the key to mission, but their rationale for doing this was pragmatic—the missions needed to be relieved of the burden of financially supporting the newer churches—rather than theological.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a disintegration of the unity of vision of mission as church planting, and 'the old passion for classical evangelistic missions was swallowed up by the other good things a church must do.'[20] Evangelicals, especially in the 1960s onwards, began to recognize God's mission was broader than the activities of the church, and that the many social needs of people needed to be addressed. This was a development which had been birthed in the ecumenical movement in the early twentieth century, and evangelicals had initially reacted by sharpening their focus on evangelism and church planting.

The tension within earlier Protestantism with regard to the place of church planting as opposed to individual salvation continued among evangelicals in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1940s and 1950s,

8 Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 182-183.

9 Cyprian, letter 73.21, cited in Jayakiran Sebastian, 'Sensitivity and Proclamation: Perspectives on Mission from the Writings of Cyprian', *Mission Studies* 15 (1998): 40.

10 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 258.

11 Augustine, letter 199, cited in *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, eds. Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 259.

12 Jan Jongeneel, 'The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius', *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991), 63-64.

13 Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 178.

14 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 331; Brian Woodford, 'One Church, Many Churches: A Five-Model Approach to Church Planting and Evaluation, PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997, 23.

15 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 262-273.

16 Woodford, 'One Church', 22.

17 Peter Beyerhaus, 'World Evangelization and the Kingdom of God,' *Let the Earth Hear his Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 393.

18 Cited in Brian Stanley, 'Planting Self-Governing Churches', *Baptist Quarterly* 34 (1992), 381.

19 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 331.

20 Robertson McQuilkin, 'The Missionary Task', in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott Moreau, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 648.

despite the field reality that the 'logic of the gospel'[21] had led many missionaries to start hospitals, schools, and orphanages, 'Evangelicals articulated only one major goal of mission: the salvation of individual souls.'[22] This goal was reassessed in the 1960s, especially in the form of the two major evangelical missionary conferences in 1966—the Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission (at Wheaton), and the World Congress on Evangelism (in Berlin).

The Wheaton conference (as well as much of evangelical missions thinking from the 1960s onwards) was deeply influenced by the Church Growth Movement under Donald McGavran's leadership. Arthur Glasser, a co-faculty member with McGavran and church growth proponent, initially drafted the report, which included the statements: 'The Church's work is to preach the Gospel and plant congregations in every community' and 'church planting has the priority among all other mission activities.'[23] The reports of these conferences reveal a 'major shift from the strongly individualistic categories of previous decades to an increased emphasis on the church….'[24] In these evangelical conferences and the regional conferences which followed them, the need for missionary and church involvement in social issues which had already been embraced by the ecumenical movement also became a recurring theme.[25]

During the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, church planting continued to hold a prominent place, especially through the influence of Donald McGavran and Ralph Winter. They and others emphasised 'the place of the local church both as goal and as instrument of world evangelization.'[26] But church planting was not the only topic addressed; the relationship between evangelism and social action also kept coming up for discussion during the conference, and following John Stott's lead, they came to be seen as partners by many evangelicals, with evangelism being primary.

During the 1980s, although the primacy of evangelism (including church planting) was again stressed, two major conferences—the Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (Grand Rapids, 1982), and the Consultation on the Church in Response to Human Need (Wheaton, 1983)—affirmed that evangelicals must be involved with people in all their needs.[27] The Grand Rapids Consultation report included a statement on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, which outlined three kinds of legitimate connection (in the view of the writers) between the two: social activity as a consequence of evangelism, as a bridge to evangelism, and as the partner of evangelism. Evangelism was once again affirmed as having 'a certain priority,' but the discomfort of some of the delegates with this was noted.[28]

The Manila Manifesto which emerged from the 1989 Lausanne II Congress on World Evangelism kept evangelism in the form of proclamation as a focus, but evidenced a shift towards the wide acceptance of social concern as an integral part of the gospel.[29] It called for 'an integration of words and deeds' and emphasised the gospel as having 'inescapable social implications' while also affirming that evangelism is primary.[30] Church planting, and even multiplication, was interestingly also specifically highlighted in the statement '… the gospel creates the church which spreads the gospel which creates more churches in a continuous chain-reaction'.[31]

This overview confirms Johnston's statement that, despite periods when the salvation of individuals was the dominant concern, 'There seems to be adequate evidence that the planting of indigenous churches has been a general characteristic of missions since the apostolic age.'[32]

III The Current Evangelical Debate

In Justice Anderson's view, 'Evangelical missions have always emphasised personal evangelism and starting churches (congregations) as their basic purpose.'[33] Yet there are important differences among evangelicals concerning the relative importance of church planting and social responsibility.

Scott Moreau's analysis has led him to see three streams within evangelicalism, which have solidified since the International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in 1974.[34] The first emphasises mission as evangelism and church planting; the second, following John Stott, focuses on integrating a holistic approach to mission; and the third, which includes Samuel Escobar and Rene Padilla, considers social justice to be just as important a goal of mission as evangelism and church planting.[35] The second two streams are fundamentally similar in that they view social action with the hope of societal transformation as a

21 cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 102-103.

22 Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 131.

23 Wheaton Declaration, *International Review of Mission* 55 (1966), 467; Scott Moreau, 'Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission', in *Evangelical Dictionary*, ed. Scott Moreau, 223.

24 Van Engen, *Mission*, 134.

25 Paul Hiebert and Monte Cox, 'Evangelism and Social Responsibility', in *Evangelical Dictionary*, ed. Scott Moreau, 345.

26 Van Engen, *Mission*, 138.

27 Hiebert and Cox, 'Evangelism', 345.

28 *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment*, Grand Rapids Report No. 21, Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization and the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1982), 4, C.

29 Doug McConnell, 'Holistic Mission', in *Evangelical Dictionary*, ed. Scott Moreau, 449.

30 'Manila Manifesto', in *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989*, ed. John Stott (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1989), A, no. 4.

31 Manila Manifesto, B, no. 8.

32 Arthur Johnston, 'Church Growth Theology and World Evangelization', in *Theology and Mission: Papers Given at Trinity Consultation No.1*, ed. David Hesselgrave (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), 190.

33 Justice Anderson, 'Church Development', in *Evangelical Dictionary*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 198.

34 Scott Moreau, 'Mission and Missions', in *Evangelical Dictionary*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000b), 637.

35 Moreau, 'Mission and Missions', 637-638.

vital goal of mission, and will be considered together.

Donald McGavran, David Hesselgrave, and Kenneth Mulholland are representative of those who contend that church planting is the heart and primary purpose of Christian mission. McGavran saw church growth, which he defined as 'the planting and care of self-propagating churches,' as the primary goal of mission and of God's mission.[36] Hesselgrave agrees, contending that while Christians have many other important tasks, few of them can be accomplished unless new churches are planted and grow in maturity in Christ.[37] He sees medical, educational, and other types of social help as worthy Christian endeavours in keeping with Galatians 6:10, but insists that unless these activities support church planting significantly, they should not be thought of as part of the Church's mission.[38] Mulholland similarly puts church planting at the centre of missionary activity. 'The goal of missions is to establish within every people group in the world… indigenous church movements which are capable of so multiplying congregations….'[39]

The second group of missions thinkers, which includes Johannes Verkuyl, David Bosch, John Stott, James Engel, and William Dyrness, see church planting as an indispensable element in mission, but not as necessarily the most important goal. Verkuyl, for example, argues that viewing mission only as church planting is too ecclesiocentric, and that it must not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as part of the wider goal of the kingdom of God.[40] He also criticises McGavran's consistent setting of church growth as the first priority as being 'one-sided and unbiblical.' Instead, he sees the priority in the New Testament as changing according to the situation, so that addressing hunger, or sickness, or justice are sometimes the focus.[41]

Stott understands social action to be a partner of evangelism in the sense that they each stand independently and in their own right as worthy goals of mission, with neither being the means to the other nor the manifestation of the other.[42] Engel and Dyrness, in their book *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?*, affirm that evangelism is the indispensable first step in making disciples, and that church planting is needed. However, they challenge the validity of evangelism without social transformation, and question the call by some to accelerate church planting in order to evangelise the maximum number of unreached in the shortest possible time.[43]

Those who see church planting as the fundamental task of missionary activity are concerned that broadening of the missionary task to include addressing physical, social, and political needs has had the effect of redirecting much missionary effort away from the central task, and has opened the door for missionary activity to become 'all the good things a church does away from home.' Robertson McQuilkin notes that the focus of many evangelical missionaries has indeed shifted away from church planting to pastoral, educational, and other helping roles, and the definition of 'missions' has become 'sending people away from the home church to serve God in some capacity elsewhere, especially cross-culturally.'[44]

IV Missio Dei and the Kingdom of God

In order to understand both the rightful place of church planting in evangelical mission theology and its relationship to social action, we need to explore the relationship of church planting to God's mission, or *missio Dei*, and to the kingdom of God. Ecumenical theologians in the Willingen meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1952 felt that both mission and church needed to be subordinated under the *missio Dei*[45] and many evangelical missions theologians have agreed with this perspective, affirming that 'our missionary activities are only authentic insofar as they reflect participation in the mission of God.'[46]

Van Engen identifies the need for an integrating idea, which would hold the various themes in the *missio Dei* together.[47] For many missiologists[48] the kingdom of God is that integrating idea, and God's bringing in of his kingdom is the goal of the *missio Dei*. Bavinck explains that church planting, along with the conversion of the unsaved and the glorification of God, is one of the three main purposes of mission, and that each are in fact part of one overall purpose of God—the coming and extension of his kingdom.[49]

If God's mission is to bring in his kingdom—and there is broad agreement on this—what role does the church—his people—play in this work? Most theologians, whatever their primary picture of the kingdom of God is (and it is multifaceted), see an essential link between the church and the kingdom, and see at least a partial identification of the church and the kingdom.[50]

36 Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,1970), 32, 34, 67.

37 David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide to Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 30.

38 Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches*, 31.

39 Kenneth Mulholland, 'A Church for All Peoples', in *World Mission: An Analysis of the World Christian Movement*, ed. Jonathan Lewis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1994), 3-20.

40 Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 188, 201.

41 Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 192.

42 John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), 26-27.

43 James Engel and William Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 64-65, 80, 178.

44 McQuilkin, 'The Missionary Task', 648.

45 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 370.

46 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

47 Van Engen, *Mission on the Way*, 42-43.

48 e.g., J. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960); Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*; and Arthur Glasser, 'The Whole Bible Basis of Mission', in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, ed. Arthur F. Glasser and Donald McGavran (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983).

49 Bavinck, *An Introduction*, 155.

50 Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 69; Andrew Kirk. 'The Kingdom of God and the Church in Contemporary Protestantism and Catholicism', in *Let the Earth*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 1073.

In his seminal work on the kingdom of God, George Eldon Ladd contends that the church, while it is not the full expression of the kingdom, is nevertheless the primary manifestation of the kingdom in the world today.[51] Evangelicals have largely agreed with Ladd's conclusions. Missiologists Michael Griffiths, Arthur Glasser, Wilbert Shenk, Peter Kuzmic, and Charles Van Engen, and church planters Eddie Gibbs, Rick Love, and Martin Robinson and Stuart Christine all agree that the church is closely related to the kingdom, but not identical to it, and that the church is an agent of and the primary manifestation of the kingdom today.[52]

Others contend that making church planting the goal of mission narrows the concept of the kingdom of God. For example, Stuart Murray, agreeing with David Bosch, feels that when church planting becomes the goal of mission, the church begins to point to itself rather than to God or the future, and a very human-oriented ecclesiastical expansionism can set in. In addition, they fear that social justice and cultural engagement will be neglected if church planting is central.[53]

Murray and Bosch are right to criticise ecclesiastical expansionism, which is motivated by pride in one's own denomination or tradition and tends to focus on the institutional aspect of the church. However, they confuse the issue by failing to separate the human, imperfect, institutionalised expressions of church from the church as God sees it. The church (and therefore local churches) although composed of imperfect people, is not a human invention. It is the body and bride of Christ who Jesus gave his life for and loves (Eph. 5:23-27). Jesus' pouring out of love on the church, to the point of extreme suffering and death, was for the purpose of presenting the church to himself as a pure and holy bride to her husband (Eph. 5:27). The church is, then, not only an instrument of God's purposes, but an end in itself, and even the central goal of what God in Christ is doing in the world. The church is at the heart of God's purposes and Christ's saving work, and is therefore also at the heart of the mission of God.[54]

The charge that making church

51 George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (London: Paternoster, 1959), 117.

52 Michael Griffiths, *The Church and World Mission: Arousing the People of God to Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980); Glasser, 'The Whole Bible'; Wilbert Shenk, 'Kingdom, Mission, and Church Growth', in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); Peter Kuzmic, 'The Church and the Kingdom of God', in *The Church: God's Agent for Change*, ed. Bruce Nicholls (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1986); Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991); Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981); Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic, and the Kingdom of God* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000); Robinson and Christine, *Planting*.

53 Bosch *Transforming Mission*, 332; Stuart Murray, *Church Planting*, 43-47.

54 Tim Chester, 'Church Planting: A Theological Perspective', in *Multiplying Churches: Reaching Today's Communities through Church Planting*, ed. Stephen Timmis (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 29.

planting the goal of mission leads to the church pointing to itself is an attractive argument, but in both the Old and New Testaments the community life of the people of God is a sign which points to God. Jesus says that the love that disciples have for each other will be the way people know that they really are disciples of Jesus, and he prays that they may be one, so that the world will know the Father sent him (Jn. 13:35; 17:23).

The aim of church planting, then, is to create communities which display these kingdom qualities of love and unity and thus point to God. Bryant Myers, a key evangelical proponent of holistic mission, states that 'A church full of life and love, working for the good of the community in which God has placed it, is the proper end of mission' and that community development 'that does not work towards such a church is neither sustainable nor Christian'[55] While the blessings of the kingdom of God include the social, physical, and cultural dimensions, the planting of new communities of the kingdom is the primary means by which these blessings can be brought to new communities. Chester aptly concludes: 'The choice is not between church planting and social justice. The choice is between planting introverted churches and planting open, socially engaged churches.'[56]

Newbigin makes a very practical, but nevertheless vital point, when he shows that acts of justice and compassion, in order to be signs pointing to the Kingdom of God, must flow from the agency of the Kingdom—churches. Without such communities, the social aspects of the Kingdom cannot be expressed. He states:

> It is futile to talk about the task of the church as an agent of liberation—in whatever terms we understand that task—unless we also pay attention to the ways in which the church in any place comes into being and grows. It is useless to talk about the task if you are not concerned about the agency which is to carry out the task…. The calling of men and women to be converted, to follow Jesus, and to be part of his community is, and must always be, at the center of mission.[57]

There are several biblical pointers to the church's role as the central expression of the kingdom of God until Jesus comes again. The first of these is found in Matthew chapter sixteen, where the Kingdom and the church are explicitly linked.[58] A second pointer is the fact that the church is the result of preaching the kingdom of God.[59] The gospel Philip and Paul each preached was the message of the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; 19:8); Paul saw himself and his fellow-workers as working for the kingdom of God (Col. 4:11). Churches were the result of this preaching. A third pointer is the way the early church displayed the reign of Christ. The baptism of the Spirit on the day of

55 Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practice of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1999), 39.

56 Chester, 'Church Planting', 32.

57 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 135.

58 Ladd, *The Gospel*, 54-56, 111-114.

59 Kuzmic, 'The Church', 65.

Pentecost was marked by the same signs of the kingdom that had characterized Jesus' earthly ministry—authoritative preaching, the forgiveness of sins, healing of the sick, and victory over the powers.[60] A final pointer is found in Colossians 1:12-13 and Revelation 1:6, which make it clear that believers in Jesus Christ have been brought into his kingdom, and that 'He has made us a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.'

Church planting, while not the ultimate goal of mission, is the primary means of bringing in the blessings of the kingdom. Churches function as God's channels of blessing as they serve the physical and social needs of people in their community through the various gifts given to them. But the primary missionary task of the church remains the planting of churches where there are none, a task which is accomplished by various means, but most often by the sending out of apostolic (i.e. church planting) workers.

In summary, both the church and the kingdom are brought about by *missio Dei*, preaching the kingdom seems to be a synonym for evangelism and church planting, and although the kingdom is the final goal of God's mission, the church is the way and means by which he is accomplishing that purpose now.[61]

V A Gradually Unfolding Revelation

Several evangelical writers suggest that the importance of planting churches was a revelation which unfolded gradually. Jesus said nothing about church planting directly, but his ministry and teaching gave hints about it. Once the disciples themselves engaged in mission, however, their understanding of that mission and its consequences developed in stages.

1. The Embryonic Church

Jesus drew around himself a group of disciples which he shaped into a community focused on his kingship and kingdom. This group of disciples was an embryonic church which was added to on the day of Pentecost.[62] Jesus both modelled and taught the principles of living as a kingdom community. He also envisaged the church both coming into being when he promised 'I will build my church' (Mt. 16:28) and being fleshed out in real communities of disciples in Matthew 18:15-19, in which he teaches that a brother who will not listen must finally be disciplined by the church community, and he promises his own presence to those who gather in his name.

2. The Great Commission

Church planting is implied by The Great Commission. According to Bosch, Matthew 'talks about disciples and disciplemaking', but in his thinking this is the same as 'being a member of the Church' and 'incorporating people into the Christian community'.[63] The command to baptise in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reflects not only the individual's change of allegiance, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the incorporation of the person into Christ and his community. Since it is a public ritual of identification with, and incorporation into God's people—the Church—it assumes and points to the Church.[64]

Making disciples by baptising and teaching implies 'a range of activities involving other believers being gathered together and having a relationship of accountability in a congregation.'[65] Jesus' command to teach the new disciples everything he had commanded his disciples includes obedience to the central command to love and to the other 'one another' commands. These require mutual interdependence which necessitates Christian communities.

3. Pentecost

When the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, the disciples were baptised into one body and thus made members of the church (Acts 2:1-4; 1 Cor. 12:13). The Lord led these new believers into a pattern of life together, described in Acts 2:5-47 and 4:23-37, and 'they began to discover that God had given to them a corporate life quite distinct from their individual relationship to Christ.'[66] Hill notes that the message about Jesus was translated into the structure and formed the character of the new community of believers.[67]

Preaching the gospel led to people becoming believers, and wherever this happened, churches were formed. Talmadge Amberson draws attention to the 'sense of spontaneity about churches coming into being in the book of Acts' and that 'The testimony of Scripture is that obedience to Jesus Christ in sharing his message of salvation inevitably and spontaneously brings into being the outward, external structure termed *churches*.[68] Thus, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, churches appear as the natural consequence, and God's intended result, of proclaiming the gospel.

4. Antioch and the Jerusalem Council

The Antioch church made two key contributions to the emerging church planting movement. Consisting as it did of both Jews and Gentiles, it firstly acted as a model for all the churches later established through Paul's missionary journeys. Secondly, its leaders took the question of whether Gentile believers needed to become Jews to be saved to the Council at Jerusalem,

60 Glasser, 'The Whole Bible', 42-44).

61 Griffiths, *The Church*, 19-20.

62 Talmadge Amberson, 'The Foundation for Church Planting', in *The Birth of Churches: A Biblical Basis for Church Planting*, ed. Talmadge R. Amberson (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1979), 35.

63 David Bosch, 'The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:1-20', in *Exploring*, ed. Wilbert Shenk, 243.

64 cf. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 167.

65 Patrick Johnstone, *The Church is Bigger than you Think* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 19.

66 Arthur Glasser, 'The Missionary Task: An Introduction', in *Crucial dimensions in World Evangelization*, ed. Arthur Glasser, Paul Hiebert, Peter Wagner, and Ralph Winter (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1976), 6.

67 Monica Hill, *How to Plant Churches* (London: MARC Europe, 1984), 13.

68 Amberson, 'The Foundation', 41-42.

which became the pivotal event for the development of the Christian movement.[69] The council's decision opened the way for anybody—Jew or Gentile—who responded to the gospel to be included in churches. From the birth of the church at Antioch onwards, '… the New Testament clearly indicates that churches were formed wherever some became Christians.'[70]

5. Paul's Ministry

The ministry of church planting is revealed most clearly and fully in Paul's life and letters. Although Paul was primarily engaged in evangelism, 'he also founded churches as a necessary element in his missionary task. Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into him, and thus membership within a Christian community.'[71]

Paul's missionary activity went beyond gospel proclamation to the starting and nurturing of churches.[72] He uses the words 'planting' (1 Cor. 3:6-9; 9:7, 10, 11), 'laying foundations' (Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10), 'giving birth' (1 Cor. 4:15; Phlm. 10), and 'betrothing' (2 Cor. 11:2) for starting churches. His nurturing of churches is clear from the longer times he spent at Corinth and Ephesus, from Luke's description of his encouraging and strengthening new disciples (Acts 14:22), and from his own description of his task as bringing believers to maturity in Christ (Rom 1:1-15; 15:14-16; Eph. 3:8-9; Col. 1:24—2:7).[73]

VI Local, Incarnational Communities

The strong individualism of Western culture, of Pietism in the early missionary movement, of revivalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and of crusade evangelism in the twentieth century has deeply influenced the worldview of the church and the theology of much of the northern hemisphere. Chester states: 'By making a personal relationship with God its touchstone, evangelical theology has struggled to give the communion of God's people the importance it receives in the biblical narrative'.[74] We need to explore, therefore, why the gathering of believers into local churches is vital.

1. The Communal Nature of Salvation

The gathering of believers into churches is essential because God's salvation is communal. God's purposes throughout the Bible are not focused on many unrelated individuals, but on his people. 'The church is not an *ad hoc* collection of those individuals who

69 Robinson and Christine, *Planting*, 19.

70 Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970), 60.

71 Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 180.

72 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*; Paul Bowers, 'Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of Pauline Mission'. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987); Peter O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993).

73 Bowers, 'Fulfilling', 186.

74 Chester, 'Church Planting', 27.

have come to know God…. Quite the opposite: individuals are saved insofar as they become part of the people of God by grace through faith.'[75] Andreas Kostenberger and Peter O'Brien state that 'Conversion to Christ necessarily involved incorporation into a Christian community.'[76] Evangelical missiologists and theologians are united on this point.[77]

From the birth of the church in Jerusalem, believers became related to one another in concrete ways. Baptism was a public identification not only with Christ but also with other believers, and that this is what Peter called people to in Acts 2:38. Baptism is no individualistic act; it is the seal of membership into the people of God.[78] The new believers were related to one another in visible ways as they devoted themselves to fellowship, supporting each other and relieving the needs of the poor.[79] In Paul's mind, too, embracing the gospel necessarily implied entering a community.

Several reasons for the necessity of community have been put forward. Firstly, acceptance by and reconciliation with God necessitated acceptance of and reconciliation with those God had already welcomed (Rom. 15:7; Phil. 4:2-3), and union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared experience (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; Eph. 4:3).[80] Secondly, it is only 'together with all the saints' that we are able to comprehend the dimensions of Christ's love (Eph. 3:17-19).[81] Thirdly, Christians are branches of the same vine, living stones in the same building, sheep in the same flock, children in the same family, organs in the same body, and their corporate nature needs to be expressed in practical mutual interdependence and obedience to the "one another" commands.[82] Fourthly, each person before their encounter with Christ belongs to a community in solidarity with Adam, but God calls a second community has come into existence through the 'second man,' Christ. He is the foundation of a new community, humanity, or creation (Rom. 5:12-21; cf. Rom. 6:3-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:15-16).[83] Fifthly, just as Jesus called the first disciples into fellowship with the Father and the Son, to follow his example they also called new believers into fellowship with themselves and with each other (1 Jn. 1:1-3).[84]

75 Chester, 'Church Planting, 28.

76 Kostenberger and O'Brien, *Salvation*, 269.

77 Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 76; Robert Banks, *The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1980); Bavinck, *An Introduction*, 159; Howard Snyder, 'The Church as God's Agent in Evangelism', in *Let the Earth Hear his Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization*, ed. John Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975); Stott, *Christian Mission*, 119; Alan Tippett, *Introduction to Missology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1987), 34. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 200.

78 cf. Bosch, *Transforming*, 167.

79 John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 87.

80 Banks, *Paul's Idea*, 33.

81 Bavinck, *An Introduction*, 159.

82 Mulholland, 'A church', 3-20.

83 Banks, *Paul's Idea*.

84 Tippett, *Introduction*, 40-43.

The fundamental and most compelling reason for believers to be in community, though, is implicit in the fifth reason above. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are already a community, and members of the family of God have been made part of that community which provides a pattern for relationships among believers.[85]

2. God's People in Local Communities

Paul uses the word *ekklesia*, which is found sixty times in his letters, primarily to refer to actual gatherings of Christians or to Christians in a locality as regularly-gathering communities.[86] In his later letters, Paul also uses *ekklesia* to mean a heavenly reality to which all Christians belong. Banks explains how local churches are tangible, local expressions in time and space of the eternal, heavenly church.[87] Since local churches are the tangible, visible expression of the heavenly church, God's intent that 'now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 3:10), is a purpose which is worked out through local churches. The messages in the second two chapters of Revelation to the seven churches in Asia, set as they are the context of God's cosmic plan, further strengthen the idea that local churches are precious to God and a vital part of God's plan for the world.

Congregations are 'a hermeneutic of the gospel,'[88] meaning that people interpret Christ and the gospel through the mediation of the local church. In particular, it is when people see how God's people live out their lives together, how their relationships function, and how they love each other, that they can comprehend Christ and are drawn to him (Jn. 13: 35).[89] 'In the New Testament the role of the Christian community *as a witness to God's Word in its own right* features prominently.'[90] One biblical example of this is Acts 2:42-47, which describes the quality of the believers' community, and is immediately followed by the statement that 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

VII Church Planting as Reproduction

The activity of starting new churches is part of God's in-built design for churches. The image of the body of Christ expresses that the church is a living organism and, as such, it has been designed to reproduce. Snyder writes: 'Just as all biblical figures for the Church imply life, so do they suggest growth and reproduction. It is of the nature of the Church to grow and reproduce….'[91]

85 cf. *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 84-85.

86 Banks, *Paul's Idea*, 36.

87 Banks, *Paul's Idea*, 43-47.

88 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

89 Michael Green. 'Methods and Strategy in the Evangelism of the Early Church', in *Let the Earth*, ed. J.D.Douglas, 165-169.

90 Nigel Biggar, 'The Church's Witness in Evangelism and Social Praxis', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992), 303-304.

91 Snyder, 'The Church', 331.

One of the principles of creation is that living things have been designed to reproduce according to its kind (Gen. 1:9, 12, 21, 25). Spiritual reproduction follows the same pattern, in that like gives birth to like: 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit' (Jn. 3:6). Churches are designed to reproduce, and the reproduction of the life of a church involves the planting of new healthy churches.[92] Paul's image of planting seed, watering it, and God making it grow, referring to the church at Corinth, strongly suggests reproduction through the agency of the human sower and the seed, which is the message of the kingdom (Mt. 13:19; 1 Cor. 3:6-7).

VIII Conclusion

Evangelical mission theologians have always seen the establishment of new churches as a fundamental task of mission. In practice, however, the salvation of individuals has often taken priority, and Protestants have done little to develop a theology of church planting.

Over the past few decades the theme of bringing in the kingdom of God has begun to be embraced by many evangelical theologians as the dominant motif of mission. God's bringing in of his kingdom is now seen by many evangelical scholars as the goal of his mission, the *mission* Dei. Concurrent with the recognition of the importance of the kingdom of God has been an emphasis on the transformation of societies through community development and working for social justice. These have begun to be seen as primary goals of mission as part of bringing in the kingdom of God, and church planting has been relegated to being a secondary goal or a stepping stone to the other goals.

Here it has been argued that the planting of new churches is the primary way God's mission is accomplished, and that without it the other goals of his mission cannot be achieved. The church is at the heart of God's purposes, and is the primary agent and sign of the kingdom of God. Transformation of societies in God's desired direction occurs through the agency of God's people, and it is local churches which are designed to be the central expression of the values and life of the kingdom. Although the importance of church planting was only gradually unfolded through the book of Acts, a reading of the whole Bible makes it clear that God's plan—his mission—is to draw people from all nations into the new people he is creating and to use each local church to display his wisdom and character to their communities.

Churches have been given the life of the Holy Spirit to reproduce and start new local churches, so that where there is no relevant expression of Christ's body, existing churches are to bring new churches into being. The challenge for churches and for the church planters which they send out is to start and nurture new churches in such a way that those new churches express the values of the kingdom and so draw as many people as possible to God and bring the kind of transformation God wants to their communities.

92 cf. Luis Bush, 'The Identity of the Local Church: Biblical Principles', in *The Church: God's Agent for Change*, ed. Bruce Nicholls (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1986), 89.