

Flow, River, Flow!: The Centrality of Christ in Church Planting Movements

There is an indispensable ingredient in the facilitation of church planting movements that, if masked in any way, will to that extent impede our efforts. This ingredient is the explicit bringing of Christ to bear on every facet of our ministry. In John 7:37-38 we find this connection between Christ and church planting movements. Here is Jesus' startling announcement during the Feast of Tabernacles:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.

Notice the disproportionate quantities of water involved. The amount one can drink is obviously much less than what flows in a stream. Yet when people drink of Jesus—that is, believe in him—streams of water flow out from them. These streams symbolize the promised Holy Spirit (verse 39) who brings Messianic blessing to the needy land (Isaiah 44:3). The streams unite to form a mighty river (Ezekiel 47:1-12) and the world is transformed (Zechariah 14:8). Surely this biblical perspective on the power of Christ operating by his Spirit through the church is a key to understanding the kind of sweeping transformation involved in church planting movements. Christ must be central to our efforts because it is only belief in him that results in the flow of many streams that become a mighty, transforming river.

This centrality may seem too obvious to need comment. However, there is a strong tendency among evangelicals in our culture to apply Christ in a selective fashion: to our individual lives, but not to our collective thought patterns and practices. Furthermore, the application to our individual lives is constrained by our ignorance of collective thought patterns. This selective application of Christ impedes the flow of the streams of life.

What do I mean by “collective thought patterns and practices?” Anyone who has traveled outside of the United States has become aware of these at least to some extent. For example, while there are relational people in our country, many Latin American countries have organized their entire way of life around the principle of maintaining good relationships. This is why they tend to stand closer to each other when they talk, and why they go around and personally greet everyone in a home Bible study, even if the meeting is already underway. Our practices, on the other hand, tend to be organized more around the principle of efficiency. Why interrupt the Bible study when you can greet people afterwards? This is what I mean by collective thought patterns and their related collective practices.

These patterns are so ubiquitous that they tend to be hidden from our view. As a fish is unaware of the water in which it swims until it is brought out of it, so we tend to be unaware of our collective thought patterns until we are brought out of them. They remain relatively unexamined and taken for granted, and come to our attention only as we interact with cultures that have different collective thought patterns. We are inclined to restrict the application of Christ to the individual because we are likely to be unaware of

our collective thought patterns and practices. It is this restrictive application of Christ that is a hidden impediment to the facilitation of church planting movements.

In other words, there is a tendency to take our cultural thought patterns and practices for granted and simply add individual piety to them, sometimes with a few other additions, or attempts to show how the Bible supports those thought patterns. We end up adding Christ to a relatively unquestioned cultural foundation instead of challenging those foundations by bringing Christ to bear on them.

We are rightly warned against depending on our own strength instead of on Christ. This is idolatry and will keep us from the power and life of Jesus Christ (read 1 John in light of 5:21). However, this admonition is usually interpreted only in terms of depending on the strength of our *individual* gifts and abilities instead of on Christ. There is very little awareness or critique of the ways we might over depend on the strengths of our cultural thought patterns and practices. Although this over dependence may be relatively unconscious—maybe a kind of corporate flesh—it is also idolatry and impedes the flow of the streams of life.

When it comes to the centrality of Christ in missions, then, we need to be sure we are aware of our cultural thought patterns and that they are captive to Christ as we plan, design and carry out our various ministries. Otherwise, they will become a constraining and distorting filter through which we view even Scripture. While appreciating our God-given cultural strengths, we must allow Christ to challenge the ways in which we might depend on these more than on him.

For example, one of our strengths as a culture is the efficiency with which we like to get things done. While this is a gift from God, there is also a tendency to underestimate the extent to which we build into our ministries a dependence on these “efficiency abilities.” This thought pattern is so deeply engrained in us that it just seems normal and even Christian. So, for example, we tend to plan in ways that assume we have more control over situations than we really do. To look at our plans you would think we could engineer a church plant. To make the planning Christian we design our goals to be a little more difficult than we think we can accomplish in our own strength. This has been called “the faith factor.” This kind of planning gives the impression that we only need to depend on Christ for the more difficult aspects of the plan. Our efficiency abilities will take care of the rest.

There are numerous other practical implications of the application of Christ to our collective thought patterns and practices. For example, one of the collective strengths of our church is our good doctrine. However, how many times do we depend on the intellectual transmission of that doctrine to accomplish our mission, assuming that people’s lives will somehow be transformed if they just get the content? A Christ-centered approach would challenge the ways the idolatry of intellectualism has infiltrated the methods we use to train leaders, teach, preach and share the gospel. Further, our tendency to over depend on our cultural gift of efficiently getting things done often leads to a lack of taking the time necessary to pour our lives—not just our intellectual

content—into future leaders. A Christ-centered approach would challenge the idolatry of efficiency that has worked its way into our designs for ministry.

One of the primary implications of applying Christ to our collective thought patterns for missionaries, short-termers and churches is our need to assume the posture of a learner. In our culture learners tend to be viewed as second-class. They haven't arrived yet. They are still in the process of preparation. One of our typical collective thought patterns is that the primary task of missionaries and people who go on missions trips is to give, teach, and share, rather than to receive and learn. Learning is limited to getting a good handle on the target culture so we can more effectively direct our expertise. There is little sense of going in order to learn about deep-seated idolatries in our collective thought patterns and practices. Yes, we do have the most important message to give, but unless we are also willing to learn deeply, our giving and message will be distorted by over dependence on cultural strengths. With our words we will be telling them to trust Christ, but with our collective actions—like the ways we design ministries—we will be communicating a dependence on cultural strengths.

It is primarily interaction with other cultures that helps us critique our own collective thought patterns. How else could we become aware of something that so surrounds us? Church leaders in Latin America have gently reprimanded us for assuming that good relationships will naturally flow from efficient planning and execution. Their own assumption is just the opposite: that effectiveness will flow out of good relationships. They say that unless we learn to value relationships over efficiency, many Latin Americans will only tell us what they think we want to hear. Our typical response to this critique has been to look for more and more efficient and effective ways to meet their need of being relational so we can get on with the real business of church planting. This, of course, appears to them as another version of efficiency over relationships.

Maybe church planting movements tend to occur when the gospel of Christ is brought to bear on the usually hidden collective thought patterns and practices of a culture. When the gospel penetrates to this deep level, spiritual revival results in church planting movements. It is probably the case that we tend to over depend on our efficiency abilities, while Latin Americans tend to over depend on their relational abilities. If that is true, then we need revival on both sides. Missions is no doubt the best way for that to happen since it allows both of us to see ourselves from another point of view. Transformation can occur if we are both willing to learn from Christ through each other about otherwise hidden collective thought patterns and practices. Over dependence on them will always impede the flow of the streams of life and the church planting movements we long to see. However, if we learn deeply from each other, bringing Christ to bear not only on our individual lives but also on our collective thought patterns and practices, then we should expect to see the streams of life flowing out from us, and joining together in a mighty, unstoppable, transforming river of life. Flow, river, flow!