

# CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND: A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

DAVID STRAIN, COLE ABBEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, LONDON

This article aims to provide a theological rationale for church planting in today's Scotland. At the outset, a number of basic convictions that inform what follows should be noted. The first is a fundamental commitment to evangelical theology in its classical reformed form, and the second is a conviction that rigorous and meaningful theological enterprise must take into account both the contours of the Christian theological tradition and the cultural context into which that tradition must speak; in this case, postmodern Scotland.

All too often among conservative evangelicals church planting is regarded with scepticism at best. By many it is viewed as the a-theological hobby horse of evangelical pragmatists. We are attempting here to show that careful reflection on the cultural context of contemporary Scotland, coupled with a close reading of the biblical plot-line, will provide us with a robust theological rationale for the establishment of new congregations throughout Scotland.

## THE CULTURE AND CHURCHES OF CONTEMPORARY SCOTLAND: 'MARRIED TO MODERNITY'

Any discussion of the cultural and ecclesiastical landscape of contemporary Scotland must first of all reckon with the simple reality of a Scottish population increasingly living apart from the Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> In 1956 46% of all Scots had a live church connection. By 1984 only 17% of the adult population actually attended the churches. 'If', says Dr John Highet, '17% of the entire Scottish adult population attend church, clearly 83% –

---

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the statistical decline in Scottish churches see P. Brierley & F. MacDonald, *Prospects for Scotland* (National Bible Society for Scotland with MARC Europe, 1985); Brierley & Macdonald, *Prospects for Scotland 2000* (United Bible Societies of Scotland with Christian Research, 1995); P. Brierley, 'UK Christian Handbook', *Religious Trends 1998/99*, No.1 (Cumbria, 1999).

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

almost 4,200,000 – do not.’<sup>2</sup> Brown suggests that if the current rate of decline is sustained, ‘the proportion of Scots with a church connection will fall below... a fifth in 2012, and below a tenth in 2053’.<sup>3</sup> The fall off of church attendance and commitment in Scotland in the post-war years must be seen as indicative of a revolution in religious perspectives as significant and far reaching as the Reformation itself. A *new* reformation has taken place in Scotland since the 1950s with the result that the populace is flocking *away* from the churches in their thousands. What can account for this phenomenon? Summarising the Scottish situation, John Drane answers,

Previous generations had done a good job of contextualising the gospel into the culture of their day, but we somehow seem to have become disconnected from their vision and enthusiasm. Whether by accident or by design, my generation has seen a living faith become petrified and moribund to such an extent that some of our churches have, quite literally, become museum pieces, while those that remain are increasingly conscious of the fact that their survival can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in most of the churches of Scotland, their structural and missiological emphases reflect a modernist mindset:

In this post-modern world, people no longer join institutions or give their loyalties to religions, ideologies or employers for life. In the now notorious pick and mix culture of personal believing without corporate belonging, and in a post-mass production economy, the Church of Scotland (*and we include almost all the Scottish churches*) is struggling on as a characteristically modern institution, with its central bureaucracy, heavy investment in buildings and low investment in the education and training of its membership and dependence upon professional ministry.<sup>5</sup>

Scotland’s churches still reflect patterns of theological reflection and missiological activity which correspond to the assumptions and concerns of modernity. The phenomenon of societal change in religious conviction however is symptomatic of a revolution in the *worldview* assumptions of

---

<sup>2</sup> Brierley & MacDonald, *Prospects* (1985), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> C. Brown, ‘Religion in Scotland since 1707’ (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> J. Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London, 2000), Foreword.

<sup>5</sup> W. Storrar, ‘From Braveheart to Faintheart, Worship and Culture in Post-Modern Scotland’, *To Glorify God*, B. Spinks and I. Torrance, eds (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 78.

most Scots.<sup>6</sup> People believe, but will not belong to a religious institution, thus securing the validity of their own chosen belief structures. Believing without belonging preserves belief from the need to conform to the norm of the community. The profound change in the approach increasingly taken to questions of truth, meaning, and identity, indicates that a basic epistemological shift has taken place in Scotland. Possibly the greatest reason for the decline of the Scottish churches therefore is due to the nature of the worldview clash in which they are engaged. Worldview confrontation is basic to Christian evangelism. The problem is that, 'For the best missiological reasons', the Church has 'married modernity'.<sup>7</sup> The worldview conflict in which the Church is engaged is one in which the Church's modernity is being directly challenged by Scotland's postmodernity. It is our argument that, rejecting modernity and postmodernity alike, the Church must return to the *biblical* metanarrative, and, constructing a worldview that interprets reality through *this* lens, proclaim to a postmodern Scotland the gospel alternative. This will lead the churches at times to affirm some of the critiques of modernity offered by postmodern Scots, and at others to stand in prophetic challenge to postmodern vagaries. The planting of churches in contemporary Scotland must be seen as a basic vehicle in a process of worldview confrontation along more radical lines than the Scottish churches have so far allowed.

Nevertheless we must not deduce from the fact of *numerical* decline, any decline in *belief* or in *spirituality* among twenty-first-century Scots. Rather, the picture is one of the *transposition* of belief. The concept of transposition is defined by William Storrar as the acceptance of basic Christian beliefs and values as self-evident elements of the 'common ethical currency of Western cultures'. In post-Disruption Scotland this body of transposed values was so complete that he can speak of the 'secular vision' which replaced the 'Godly vision' of the Reformation as a 'third form of the Christian vision, a successor to the Catholic and Calvinist

---

<sup>6</sup> A fuller analysis would require an evaluation of the impact of the Second World War, the 'New Morality' of post-1950s Britain, the increased mobility and access to disposable income enjoyed by many Scots, the transition to a service/information driven economy, and the continued processes and effects of urbanisation in a Scottish context. Suffice it to say that all of these together contribute to the 'postmodern condition' in which freedom of choice in all areas of life, moral, social, and economic is increasingly central.

<sup>7</sup> Storrar, 'From Braveheart to Faintheart', in *To Glorify God*, p. 78.

visions'.<sup>8</sup> He goes on to show that that vision could retain its potency only while the corresponding Christian institutions existed in parallel to it. In today's Scotland the statistical death knell of those institutions is sounding. Remnants of the Christian vision are all that is left, persisting in various forms among the superstitions and folk religions of Scotland. Belief survives the overthrow of traditional forms of expression and commitment. Thus for example, in 1999, 60% of the UK population believed in a personal God, with a further 15% believing in a Higher Power. Thus, 75% believed in some kind of God. That belief now finds expression in countless alternative practices and communities, both explicitly religious and secular in character, within which the last vestiges of the collective cultural memory of the Christian spiritual quest continue to find voice. In its European context, postmodern Scottish society at the turn of the twentieth century was, according to Donald Smith, 'characterised by spiritual search and by existential emptiness amidst material plenty'.<sup>9</sup> What is clear is that Scottish society, in common with the rest of the UK, is absorbed in a pattern of what Davie has called, 'Believing without Belonging'.<sup>10</sup>

### *Believing without belonging*

The process of 'secularisation' notwithstanding, Scotland in the new millennium is not really a secular society. Its people are no less spiritual than at any other time. The catalogue of alternative spiritualities/lifestyles on offer addresses a basic ongoing search for the 'noumenal' in Scottish life. We continue to be a nation of seekers, yet that search increasingly finds unconventional expressions and forms that no longer correspond to the 'received wisdom' of Scotland's Churches,

There is a vast array of religious or quasi-religious beliefs present in the population: superstition, belief in the supernatural, and indeed belief in a God, which is held by probably four out of five adults.... Religious belief has been considerably shorn of Christian theology, and even when residual

---

<sup>8</sup> W. Storrar, *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 62-3.

<sup>9</sup> D. Smith, 'Mission and Reform', *The Realm of Reform*, ed. R. D. Kernohan (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> G. Davie, *Religion in Britain* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 75ff. She comments earlier: 'The crucial point to grasp is that some sort of religiosity persists despite the obvious drop in practice. The sacred does not disappear – indeed in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary society' (p. 43).

understanding remains of church teachings learnt as a child, adult concepts of the unanswerable questions about life, death and the life hereafter tend to stray from ecclesiastical wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

The people of today's Scotland still seek spiritual answers to life's ultimate questions. Yet the notion of commitment to those institutions which have been, and which continue to view themselves as, the guardians and repositories of those answers, is an option generally rejected, if it is considered at all. It is not simply that Scots do not want to 'do religion' the Kirk's way anymore. Rather it is that 'religion' is rejected altogether in favour of 'spirituality'. Authentic 'spiritual *doing*' proceeds, not from *belonging* to a religious institution, but from *being* a spiritual person. They 'frequently claim that leaving the church is actually a way of maintaining their faith. Increasing numbers of people today regard the spiritual search as something that is not necessarily supported or enhanced by involvement in the life of organized religious institutions.'<sup>12</sup> The evidence seems to indicate that for an increasing constituency of Scots, they, in common with most Britons, 'want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice.... Practice declines in all social groups (unevenly and from different starting points), while some sort of belief persists.'<sup>13</sup> People simply no longer accept the metanarrative the Church has been proclaiming in the language in which it is proclaimed. Behind the privatised religion of most contemporary Scots lies an epistemological shift that urgently requires our attention.

### *Texts and truth*

Defining postmodernism in his seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard points us to the epistemological shift that has taken place. It is an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.<sup>14</sup> That is, the conviction that there is no longer any room for the idea of an overarching explanation for life and the existence of things. It is, says Stanley Grenz,

a revolution in knowledge. More specifically the postmodern era spells the end of the 'universe' – the end of the all-encompassing worldview. In a sense, postmoderns have no worldview. A denial of the reality of a unified

---

<sup>11</sup> C. Brown, *The Social history of Religion in Scotland Since 1730* (London, 1987), p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> Drane, *McDonaldization*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester, 1979), Introduction, xxiv.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

world as the object of our perception is at the heart of postmodernism. Postmoderns reject the possibility of constructing a single correct worldview and are content simply to speak of many views and, by extension, many worlds.<sup>15</sup>

This 'incredulity towards metanarratives' has become an increasing norm in today's Scotland. At the base of that incredulity, as Lyotard shows, is a deconstruction of the function of language as communicative action. Language is a game engaged in in order to legitimate the players. It is a tool in the quest for power. The conveyance of information, the idea that meaning has a necessary connection with words, is a metaphysical nonsense. In the same vein, Derrida can argue<sup>16</sup> that all meaning is exclusively bound up with the knower, not the text. Words and truth have no connection at all. The myth of 'logo-centrism' is a tool in the power struggle of any given group.

When reasonable debate serves no purpose in achieving a knowledge of truth, all that remains are the machinations of power – whether the cause be racial, sexual, or religious. Citizens become tribespeople with little sense of the commonwealth. The maxim of 'speaking the truth to power' is transformed into 'mobilizing power to overcome the others in power'.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, the idea of 'heresy' is deconstructed. It is merely one of Gerhard Ebeling's *Wortgeschehen*, simply a language-game of the dominant group, who define 'orthodoxy' in order to enforce conformity. Religion can no longer be talked of in the 'public sphere' as commanding the assent of the majority of the populace. It is now a private affair. It rests with the choice of the knower, who makes of the religious 'text' what he will. He may do this without hesitation, since the religious text, in common with every text, bears no intrinsic resemblance to reality. Rather, its meaning is entirely the construct of the reader's own mind, or the collective interpretative predilections of his community. In reading texts, 'What we are really coming to understand is ourselves. "The text... becomes a hermeneutical aid in the understanding of present experience."' <sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> S. J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, 1996), p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> J. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', ed. R. Macksey & E. Donado, *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> D. Grootius, 'The Biblical View of Truth Challenges Postmodernist Truth Decay', *Themelios* 26.1 (2000), p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester, 1996), p. 71.

In this way the possibility of knowing, and of communicating, a single 'truly true' explanation for 'things' in the phenomenal world is exploded. Metanarratives, and the worldviews they express, are products of the arrogance of modernism, and a Christianity that claims a universal and public relevance, becomes a dangerous and untenable tool in the hands of religious manipulators.

Carson summarises the epistemological transition that has taken place:

the quest for certainty has gone, along with dependence on a single approved method in each discipline, all forms of foundationalism, and the confident assertion that the 'truths' being discovered enjoy an ahistorical universality.<sup>19</sup>

A crisis has arisen in Scotland that involves far more than the numerical decline of its churches. Nor is it simply that Scots have found other religions more appealing and fulfilling than Christianity. Scotland's crisis is one of knowing. Meaning, chimera-like, has retreated into our collective imaginations. We *create* texts as we read them, we no longer *interpret* them, much less *understand* them. 'Truth' is but a function of perspective. The only 'metanarrative' left to us is the claim that there are no metanarratives. The only heresy left for many Scots is that of claiming that they are, or could ever be, in error. Yet postmodern Scots do not think they 'know it all'. Instead they 'know' that they 'know nothing' with any degree of certainty. They live, as Lyotard puts it, at the intersection of many clouds of 'narrative functions' within each of which are conveyed, 'pragmatic valencies specific to its kind'. However, such an existence is marked by epistemological uncertainty, since, 'we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable'.<sup>20</sup>

The churches of contemporary Scotland are facing a profound crisis, which in our view provides a powerful mandate to engage in church planting. Such church plants must be self-consciously engaged in a confrontation with this new metanarrative of 'incredulity'. They must view themselves as communities seeking to embody a corporate life that demonstrates the impact of interpreting reality through the lens of the Bible's plot-line. They must find ways of telling the Bible's story with confidence and creativity, so as to invite postmoderns to adopt a stance from within the worldview assumptions of Scripture, and looking at reality

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

from this perspective, to see themselves and all of life 'under God'. Only in this way will they come to hear God's Word, not as a construct of one's own interpretative tastes, but as 'a voice from outside'. However, before a return to the biblical plot-line can restore the Church's *kerygma*, it must first inform and revitalise its *missiology*.

### MISSIOLOGY, CHURCH PLANTING, AND THE BIBLICAL PLOT-LINE

Turning for a moment from the Scottish context we will now seek to develop a (necessarily brief) overview of some of the major strands in redemptive history as they bear on the task of planting churches. In particular we will focus on three key covenantal 'moments' in redemptive history; the covenants with Adam, Abraham, and David.

#### *The covenant of life: the garden of God*

That the narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 must be understood against the background of ancient near-Eastern suzerainty covenants has been amply shown. In a now classic discussion of the subject, for example, Meredith G. Kline writes of the creation Sabbath with which the Divine creative *fiats* climax, 'The Sabbath ordinance thus called upon all earthly kingship to acknowledge itself to be a vassal kingship under the heavenly Suzerain. Now such a relationship was the kind of covenantal relationship that was defined by the ancient suzerain-vassal treaties.'<sup>21</sup> Hence, he says, 'the Lord's assignment of dominion to man over the world under conditions of Edenic beatitude (Gen. 1:28) can be seen as signalling a covenantal relationship between God and man'.<sup>22</sup> Having created our first parents and placed them in the Garden of Eden, God, the Great King, 'entered into a covenant of life with them'.<sup>23</sup> In the light of this covenantal framework for Adam's Edenic dominion, Harvey Conn can write, 'God the great King blesses Adam, his vassal, with the responsibility of covenant obedience in the world, the arena of covenant response. The earth is to be full of the knowers of God as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). Man is called to extend the covenant territory, "the garden of God" (Ezek: 28:13, 31:8-9) to the boundaries of the whole earth.'<sup>24</sup> The 'garden of God' then, stands as a sample of the full possession of YHWH, the earth in its entirety. Adam's

---

<sup>21</sup> M. G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue, Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal World View* (Overland Park, KS, 2000), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 12.

<sup>24</sup> H. Conn, *Theological Perspectives on Church Growth*, (New Jersey, 1977), p. 1.



role in tending and ruling here is a kingly and priestly one, which has reference to the design of God for 'all nations'. Through Adam the governance of the Great King was to cover all the earth and all peoples were to reside within an enlarged Eden. Yet Adam, vested with the image of the Great King (Gen. 1:26-27), as his vassal, fell into sin and rebellion, 'the garden of God' was lost, and humanity excluded. Yet in God's designs of grace Eden became an

eschatological sign of God's covenant sanctuary, repeated in the tabernacle plan delineated by God (Exod. 25ff. Heb. 8:5) and the temple design given to David (I Chron. 28:19) and pointing always to the Messianic Son of David who will build the true and eternal house of God (II Sam. 7:11-13) and the desolate land to 'become like the garden of Eden.' (Ezek. 36:35) In the redemptive work of the second Adam the task of the first Adam will be fulfilled.<sup>25</sup>

There is, then, a scope implicit in the design of God behind his placing Adam in the garden, that will reach every corner of his world, Adam's fall notwithstanding. It is only in the advent of the last Adam (I Cor. 15:45, cf. Rom. 5:12ff.) that the gates of the Edenic paradise are flung open once again to humanity. He will give 'the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God' (Rev. 2:7). Moreover, as Jeremias has it, 'the message of the Gospels goes much further [than contemporary Jewish expectation] when it says that the return of Paradise has come already with the coming of Jesus... Jesus is already the one who brings back Paradise.'<sup>26</sup>

### *The garden-sanctuary of God*

Eden was, as we have seen, a prototypical 'kingdom of God' which was vested with a sanctuary-like character as the habitation of the Creator, and the sphere of Divine-human encounter. Indeed, the links between Eden and the later Temple at Jerusalem are clear. Dumbrell points out that the verbs *cultivate* or *work*, *serve*, (*'abad*), and *guard* (*shamar*) in Genesis 2:15, are 'translated elsewhere in the OT as serving and guarding and can refer to priestly service and guarding in the tabernacle (Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; I Chron 23:32; Ezek 44:14; see also Is 56:6). Indeed, the only other

<sup>25</sup> Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> J. Jeremias, *paradeisos*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich (Vol. 5; Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 772. Cf. *Testament Of Levi* 18:10; also Matt. 11:5, cf. Isa. 35:5ff. Mark 7:37, cf. Gen. 1:31 & Isa. 35:5.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

time the OT uses both verbs together is in connection with the Levitical service and guarding of the sanctuary (Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26).<sup>27</sup> After Adam's expulsion from the garden two Cherubim were sent to *guard* (the same verb is used in Genesis 3:24 as in 2:15, *shmr, to guard, keep*) the garden-sanctuary of God. This in turn becomes,

memorialised in Israel's temple, when God commanded Moses to make two statues of Cherubim and station them on either side of the ark in the Holy of Holies. Moreover, in Ezekiel's new temple, the walls of the holy place are profusely engraved with garden emblems, while the function of the cherubim as guardians of the divine sanctuary reappears in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple.<sup>28</sup>

Thus Adam's priestly role<sup>29</sup> in the first sanctuary-garden is taken up and amplified in a series of narrowing, concentric, typological circles; 'Adam's role in Eden was to extend the contours of the garden to the whole world, since this is the transition that finally occurs in Revelation 22. As such, the presence of Adam in the garden presages Israel's role in its world, and then that of Christ as well.'<sup>30</sup> First we note the priestly role of the people of Israel serving the nations in the (fallen) garden-sanctuary of the world (Exod. 19:5-6, 'Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests'). This is followed by the priestly role of the Levites serving Israel in the emblematic garden-sanctuary of the Tabernacle and Davidic Temple. Then follows the high priesthood of the Son of David, Jesus Christ (Heb. 8:1), the True Israel, serving all nations in the temple of his flesh (John 2:19-22).<sup>31</sup> His inaugurating the restoration of access to the garden-sanctuary of communion with God is followed by the creation of a 'royal priesthood' of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), extending and

---

<sup>27</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, 'Genesis 2:1-17: A Foreshadowing of the New Creation', *Biblical Theology, Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. S. J. Haffeman (Leicester, 2002), p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 61, 'the original inhabitant of the garden, Adam, [had] a pronounced priestly/kingly character'.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> In John 4 Jesus informs the Samaritan woman that, 'her convictions about the true temple were never on track, and even the Jerusalem temple that she rejected is now superseded. Worship of God is in Spirit and Truth. What is implicit here is explicitly related in Jn. 14:16: Jesus is the truth' (G. L. Goldsworthy, 'The Great Indicative: An Aspect of a Biblical Theology of Mission', *Reformed Theological Review* 55.1 (1996), p. 11).

participating in Christ's priesthood, incorporated into Christ's Body, and being built into a living Temple (1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Pet. 4-5), finally to climax in the eschatological garden-sanctuary, where 'the dwelling of God shall be with men' once more (Rev. 21: 3), and where 'the leaves of the tree' of life shall be 'for the healing of the nations' (Rev. 22:2).

The broken 'Covenant of Life', made with Adam in the Garden, which was originally orientated to the inclusion of all the earth, led to the expulsion of humanity from communion with YHWH, but is taken up once more in the covenantal action of Jesus, the Last Adam, who fulfils the stipulations of the Adamic suzerain-vassal covenant. In doing so, the Last Adam inaugurates a process of restoration to the paradise of God. Into this priestly ministry the new Covenant community is drawn as it extends the boundaries of the garden-sanctuary of the Last Adam's dominion over all the earth, through its preaching of the gospel, and the establishment of churches as 'little-Edens', where the eschatological fullness of a restored Paradise is glimpsed by the world, and enjoyed by the New Israel of God. The relevance of such a perspective for the task of planting churches is seen when we recognise that the Church is,

established on earth as the house of God, the place where His glory dwells, and to which the nations are drawn. God's praises are drawn from the new Zion, and the nations are called to join the song (Is. 25:6-8; 52:7-10; 60:1-3; Ps 96:3). The church is prefigured in the house of God's dwelling in Zion (Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5 cf. Heb. 12:22; Phil. 3:20). In Christ, God's promises are fulfilled; the door is opened for the gentiles to be drawn in.<sup>32</sup>

The Church is called to participation in the work of the Last Adam, as he fulfils the covenant obligation to 'fill the earth and subdue it' through the ministry of gathering communities that are characterised by the enjoyment of an inaugurated Paradise. Churches are planted because the Garden of God is growing, until its boundaries encompass all nations. Those churches serve as signs and samples of life in that Garden, and as agents in its extension.

### *The Abrahamic covenant: embracing the nations*

The promises to Abram, following on the call to leave his father's household, form the next central element in the unfolding programme of God for the mission of the Church in the world. The particularising words, indicating YHWH's election-commissioning of Abram, at the beginning of

---

<sup>32</sup> E. Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester, 1995), p. 162.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

Genesis 12, must be understood against the wider, universal context of chapters 1-11, specifically the 'table of nations' in Chapter 10 and the Tower of Babel narrative in Chapter 11. The 'table of nations' signals the spread and diversity of fallen humanity, while chapter 11 indicates their characteristic rebellion. Building a great tower at Shinar, they sought to 'make a name' for themselves and 'not be scattered over the face of the whole earth' (Gen. 11:4). God responded judicially by confusing their languages and effecting their scattering. However,

God initiates differentiation in judgement on man's arrogant attempt to correct the divisive impact of sin by unity in man's honour. Yet, at the same time, the very relationship of the history of Babel to both the table of nations and the covenant promises given to Abraham imply that the judicial act of God at Babel may be a redemptive judgement. God's intervention had an ultimately redemptive purpose for the nations.<sup>33</sup>

Understanding the significance of Genesis 12:1-3 within this universal context, as an indication of a missiological purpose, is fully congruent with the unfolding drama of God's redemption, and, as we will see, the New Testament's use of the Abrahamic covenant as programmatic for the planting of churches.

### *Blessing on three horizons*

Basic to the call of Abram is the Divine initiative, 'I will make... I will bless... I will make... I will bless...' (12:1-3). God is the sovereign electing Lord, who bestows blessing and selects Abram for his own purposes. However, those purposes are not altogether inscrutable, for everywhere in these three verses, and in their context, are indications of the plan of YHWH to bring the whole earth into the elect blessedness Abram enjoys. God's selection of Abram was, 'the beginning of the restoration of the lost unity of mankind, of broken fellowship with God',<sup>34</sup> that would find its ultimate resolution in the undoing of the confusion of tongues in Christ's gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:4ff.). Fundamental to the embryonic Abrahamic Covenant<sup>35</sup> as it is recorded in vv.1-3 is the emphatic, 'bless' (*brk*) or 'blessing' (*brkh*). Five times they are repeated in these three

---

<sup>33</sup> Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> Conn, *Theological Perspectives*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> '[T]he covenantal structure is apparent' (B. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 205).

verses,<sup>36</sup> so that, while the pericope commences with a word of command, to 'leave your father's country' (v.1), the duty required of Abram is clearly to be understood as a resting on the promises of 'blessing' by faith. Moreover, consistent with the passage's 'particularism of grace' that eyes the whole earth (an ultimate universalism) as its goal, this five-fold blessing may indicate the negation of the five curses pronounced on the whole human race in chapters 1-11 (see, 3:4, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25).<sup>37</sup> It is significant to note the three 'expanding horizons'<sup>38</sup> on which the successive promises of blessing are to be outworked. First, God calls Abram out of his father's house and pledges him the blessing of a land of his own, 'the land I will show you' (12:1), and a 'great name' (12:2). Secondly, God will make Abram into a blessed nation (12:2), and then thirdly, God will expand the horizons of Abram's blessings to encompass 'all the peoples on earth' (12:3). In each of these 'horizons' the blessing promised connects to redemptive-historical trajectories that run throughout the biblical plot-line to climax in the work of Christ, in whose ministry all who believe in him share. We will indicate only some of these in what follows.

### *Great names and promised seed*

In making Abram's 'name great' (12:2) the LORD is giving in free grace what humanity sought to gain by its own efforts at the Tower of Babel (11:4). 'What was sought in Shinar by autonomous human effort – the restoration of cosmic-cultic focus and the great name – was bestowed on Abraham as a promissory grant.'<sup>39</sup> The bestowal of the great name involves more than the accumulation of reputation and influence, it signalled the blessedness of the bearer of the name, along with their posterity. The closest biblical parallel to the idea of 'the great name' here, is found in 2 Samuel 7:9 where God promises David to 'make your name great'. The only other occurrences are, significantly, with reference to God's own name. The great name then, is a royal aspiration, connected to

<sup>36</sup> Compared with only five times in chapters 1-11, cf. 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2; 9:1.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, 1987), p. 270.

<sup>38</sup> B. Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 294; cf. G. Von Rad, *Genesis* (London, 1972), p. 160, 'Yahweh now intends to give what men attempted to secure arbitrarily.'

the bestowal of God-like character on ancient near-Eastern kings.<sup>40</sup> It was *this* that was sought by the tower builders at Babel, a royal, God-like name-character. It was *this* that God uniquely possesses, and *this* he graciously bestowed on Abram, then later on David, and from them, through Jesus Christ, on their Jewish and Gentile 'seed' (Gal. 3:19).

Further, the blessing and cursing involved in Abram's call (12:3) is 'an allusion to the creation account. These links confirm that Abraham is of the seed of the woman'<sup>41</sup> (see 1:22, 28). Indeed the creation connections indicate that when YHWH promises to grant the land to Abram's 'seed', (*l'zr'k*), Genesis 12:7, it is difficult to avoid the allusion to Genesis 3:15 and the promise of the 'seed' of the woman (*zr'h* : from *zr'*, 'seed, offspring'). The elect line continues to find expression in the seed of Abraham; it is from among Abraham's descendants, his seed, that we are to look for *the* Seed of the woman, in whom Eden will be restored and the serpent's head crushed. Moreover the New Testament sees in the promise of the Seed both a *corporate* fulfilment, and an *individual* one.

The promise of a *corporate* seed finds partial fulfilment in the formation of the covenant community of Israel (Num. 23:10; 1 Kgs 4:20; 2 Chron. 1:9, Acts 3:25), but its consummation only in the New Covenant community of believing Jews and Gentiles (Gen. 12:3 and Rom. 4:16-18; Gal. 3:29; Rev. 7:9).<sup>42</sup> Central to God's design then, is the formation of an elect community on earth, who will become instruments of regeneration. In short, in view is the planting of churches. Thus, according to Paul (Rom. 4:16-17), his converts, which are being gathered into visible churches all over the world, from among 'all peoples on earth' (Gen. 12:3) have Abraham as their father.

Paul also takes up the promise of the *individual* Seed in Galatians 3:16-29, 'The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds', meaning many people, but 'and to your seed', meaning one person, who is Christ.' In Christ, Paul recognises the unique Seed of Abraham, in whom all that Israel failed to accomplish that was prophesied of it, and all the blessings it never enjoyed that were promised to it, are now fulfilled. Moreover, Paul recognised that by faith Jew and Gentile alike are incorporated into Him, and therefore he can say without contradiction, 'If you belong to Christ, then *you* are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3:29). Thus

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the language of Psalm 2, where the Davidic King is declared by God to be 'my Son' and, by virtue of his enthronement, God has become his 'Father'. (vv.6-9).

<sup>41</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 203.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

because of the *one* Seed, the *corporate* Seed of Abraham is called into existence as of the covenant community, in union with Christ.

Furthermore, the missiological scope of the Abrahamic covenant becomes still more unequivocal when we notice the intertextual connections of the promise of God to make Abram a blessing (12:2). The grammatical construction of this clause is found in only two other places in the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 19:24-25, and Zechariah 8:13.<sup>43</sup> Both maintain the same theme; Israel will mediate the blessings of Abraham to the nations in their eschatological restoration.<sup>44</sup> Focusing on Isaiah 19:24, we read that, along with Israel's enemies, Egypt and Assyria, Israel will be 'a blessing [*brkh*, cf. identical use in Gen. 12:2] on the earth'. This verse is significant because, with v.25, it indicates the inclusion of two of Israel's bitterest enemies in covenant beatitude, 'The LORD Almighty [note the covenant Name] will bless them [cf. Gen.12:2] saying, "Blessed [*baruk*] be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'" Egypt, Assyria, and Israel are co-ordinated, and given appellations that indicate covenant inclusion. They are blessed, with language that is identical to Genesis 12, and, as though to resolve any doubt about the connection to the call of Abram, the *precise construction* found in Genesis 12:2 is repeated. Israel, along with Egypt and Assyria, standing in covenant unity, will, like Abram, be a blessing on the earth. Israel will become the instrument of extending the restored garden-sanctuary of God, seen in embryo in Eden, and in type in the land promised to Abraham, over the whole world.

Yet this extension of the kingdom-reign of YHWH necessarily involved a clash of world and life views that, for his physical 'seed' would entail warfare, for, 'Abraham's arrival (*when it came*) in the land was confrontational. The land was not unclaimed territory but occupied by the Canaanites, in whose midst Abraham erected the altar-claim of his God.'<sup>45</sup> Establishing the covenant community of YHWH involved erecting the alter-claim of God in the midst of Canaanite paganism. It involved, at base, a worldview confrontation. In planting New Covenant communities of Jesus Christ in a postmodern world, that same process of worldview confrontation still obtains, as the Church erects among 'all nations' the

---

<sup>43</sup> Wenham, *Genesis*, p. 275.

<sup>44</sup> Zechariah 8:13 reads, 'As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing.' Once again, as in Isaiah, the blessings mediated by Abraham will be mediated by Israel in the era of eschatological renewal and return.

<sup>45</sup> Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 336.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

altar-claim (or to put it differently, *the metanarrative*) of Jesus Christ, and extends the boundaries of his dominion.

### *Covenant indicatives and missionary imperatives*<sup>46</sup>

In the light of the above, it is clear that we are to understand Genesis 12, with the biblical writers, as indicating that Abraham was to be the vehicle of worldwide blessing; 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'. The renewal and extension of the garden-sanctuary of Eden over the entire world is firmly in view. That Paul repeatedly founded the great rationale for his church planting activities among the Gentiles upon the promises to Abraham in Genesis 12-17 indicates that more than a basis for the Pauline doctrine of justification apart from 'the works of the law' is being asserted. In Romans 2-5 and in Galatians, Paul is careful to explain his doctrine of justification by faith alone as resting on the believing pattern set by Abraham in which 'he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Gal. 3:6 *cf.* Gen. 15:6). Paul in Galatians 3 shows that 'God's promise-arrangement with Abraham was made synonymous with the gospel of grace.'<sup>47</sup> The result being, that Jewish Paul could say of Abraham to his Gentile hearers, 'He is the father of us all' (Rom. 4:16). However it is precisely because of this connection to the Abrahamic Covenant that Paul *goes* to the Gentiles with the gospel of covenant inclusion. The Abrahamic Covenant is therefore programmatic for the Church's mission, not only because it indicates the *scope* of the blessing, 'all peoples on the earth' (Gen. 12:3), but because it provides, in the gospel itself, the *rationale* for New Covenant universalism. The Pauline doctrine of Justification (that is, inclusion in Abrahamic blessedness) simply follows the paradigm Abraham set; he believed God.

Thus, when we seek a rationale for the planting of assemblies of the New Covenant community, we can do no better than to recover the Reformed emphasis on what we might call the great Abrahamic Indicative; justification by faith alone according to the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant, just as Paul did. It was the free grace of the gospel that provided the *indicative* upon which the Pauline missionary *imperatives* were founded. Paul *planted churches* because the gospel of gracious covenant inclusion was no longer confined primarily to Israel. It could no longer be contained, and was not meant to be so, to Jews alone. Now Christ had come, the doors of covenant belonging were flung wide. The path into the

---

<sup>46</sup> This language is borrowed from Goldsworthy, 'The Great Indicative', pp. 2ff.

<sup>47</sup> Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 294.



New Israel, like the path to the Edenic paradise, was made available to all in Christ. However this Indicative of grace, propelling the Pauline mission to the Gentiles as it did, carried within it an *imperative* to form those who became the 'seed of Abraham' by faith, into distinct covenant communities. In short Paul *planted churches* because, 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness'. To affirm justification by faith alone, and yet fail to labour to establish assemblies of the justified – to plant churches in other words – was an inconceivable paradox.<sup>48</sup>

### THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

The current crisis that confronts the churches calls them with renewed vigour to mission. The nature of life in today's Scotland itself *mandates* church planting. Further, we have seen that throughout redemptive-history the gathering of a worshipping community that enjoys a foretaste of the coming eschatological restoration of the Edenic sanctuary of God has always been at the heart of God's plan. That plan finds its shape through the covenantal development of history. All of the relationships sustained by the Triune God are covenantal in form. The *rationale* for church planting in large part must therefore derive from its integration into the purposes of God throughout the *historia-salutis*. If we can say that planting churches is part of the gospel, we can also say with confidence that sensitivity to that gospel as it is articulated in Scripture will lead to a covenantal approach to church planting. As we conclude, we are concerned to outline the contours of this covenantal approach in a way relevant to the contemporary Scottish situation.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Again, in fuller discussion something needs to be said about the place of the Mosaic covenant. Suffice it to say that, in the structure of the Pentateuch, the Sinaitic Covenant is the partial fulfilment, consolidation, and development of the Abrahamic Covenant. Thus Sinai dovetails carefully with the unfolding *Missio Dei* ('mission of God') initiated in Eden and given programmatic form in the Abrahamic Covenant.

<sup>49</sup> We cannot now outline in any depth the practicalities involved in planting churches. That techniques and mechanisms are of some use, we do not deny. However, it has been our conviction throughout this paper that, while a great deal has been written on a pragmatic basis to support and facilitate church planting, there has been very little rigorous theological thinking about the task. Following an incarnational model, it is our view that the reflective practitioner can only ultimately derive a more prescriptive programme of 'do's and 'don't's for the planting of churches from within their own particular context and environment. We are seeking here only to

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

There are two crucial motifs that help outline a theological approach to church planting that is both contextual and sensitive to the covenantal contours of Scripture. First, church planting must be viewed as a vehicle for the advancement of the *missio Dei*. The Church has been brought into the circle of the intra-Trinitarian economy, an economy that is deeply covenantal in form. The planted church is an executor of the mission of the Triune God. Secondly, and arising directly from the former, church planting must be fundamentally incarnational. That is, it must be concerned for the development of a thoroughly contextualised community of faith, proclaiming a contextualised gospel.

### *The covenant of redemption and the 'missio Dei'*

We have noted that the *task* of planting churches is rooted in every successive unfolding of the covenant structure of redemptive-history. When we begin to ask what *form* a church plant should take, we must look behind the temporal covenants that demark the progression of human history, to the eternal intra-Trinitarian economy. Here the Reformed tradition points to the eternal compact entered into by God the Father with God the Son, as Mediator of his people, in which the Son promises to accomplish the work of redemption by his active and passive obedience, and the Father pledges to save and redeem his people by his Son, and to glorify his Son with the 'name that is above every name'. Scripture alludes to this pre-temporal intra-Trinitarian covenant in many places. In John's Gospel for example, Christ declares 'the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (5:19). There is a relationship of obedience and dependence that reflects the subordination of Christ as mediator to the Father. This role-relationship is explained in terms of the Father's bestowal of specific tasks upon the Son. He is to give life (v.21). The Father has 'entrusted all judgement to the Son' (v.22). Jesus conceives of the Father as 'the one who sent me' (v.24), and he declares that his ministry is to 'seek not to please myself but him who sent me' (v.30). Jesus therefore was conscious of having been given a redemptive task by the Father, and saw himself as the Servant of the Lord, pursuing His

---

make a case for broad missiological principles that will inform such a contextual programme. For examples of a more pragmatic approach to the doing of church planting see S. D. Faircloth, *Church Planting for Reproduction* (Grand Rapids, 1991); A. Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, 1992), H. Conn, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches* (Grand Rapids, 1997).

pleasure. In John 6:37-39 he announces that 'all that the Father gives me will come to me.... For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me...'. The Father, in sending the Son, has given him a people to save and never lose. Moreover, Jesus' own impending death is understood by him in terms of the commandment of the Father, 'No-one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father' (John 10:18). In John 17, he acknowledges that the Father 'granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him' (17:2).<sup>50</sup>

The concept of an intra-Trinitarian engagement of the Son by the Father is basic to the life, ministry, and self-understanding of Christ. Historically, this engagement has been described, at least in the Reformed tradition, in terms of the 'covenant of redemption'.<sup>51</sup> What is significant for our purposes is the link made by Christ himself between *his* work, in fulfilment of the covenant-mission of the Triune God, and the mission of the *Church*. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (John 20:21-23). Of vital importance here is the enlarging of the mission of the Triune God ('as the Father has sent me') to include, not only the Persons of the Godhead, but the Church ('I am sending you'), living in mystical union

---

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Luke 22:29, which demonstrates that the relation of Son to the Father in the redemptive economy has the form of a covenant: 'I confer [*diatithemai*; confer by a *covenant*] on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred [*dietheto*] one on me.' Jesus' bestowal of the Kingdom upon his people is a *covenantal* action towards them that rests upon a *prior covenantal action* of the Father towards him. See also, Ps. 89:3 (based on 2 Sam. 7:12-14 and cited in Heb. 1:5 as Messianic); Isa. 42:6; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:4, 3:9, 11; 2 Thes. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; Jas 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:2.

<sup>51</sup> Mastricht, a Mark, Owen, Dickson, Durham, Rutherford, Turretin, Witsius, Heppe, the Hodges, Shedd, Vos, Bavinck and Honig, and more recently Kline and Reymond, have all espoused this view. However, some Reformed theologians, not denying the covenantal intra-Trinitarian relation, have preferred to speak of it as a part of the one covenant of grace. Of this view were, most notably, Thomas Boston, and Abraham Kuyper. John Murray and B. B. Warfield preferred not to speak of a *covenant* so much as of a 'redemptive economy', or simply of the 'plan of salvation'.

with its risen Lord. All three Persons are here represented; the Father, who sent Christ, then Christ who sends the Church, and the Spirit, with whom the Church is invested that they may carry on Christ's work of ministering the forgiveness of sins to a fallen world. We have already noted how the covenant-commission of Matthew 28 has the gathering of communities of discipleship in view. We should further note, however, that the Matthean emphasis on baptism into the Triune name of God at the command of the Risen Christ signals the participation of the disciple, with the believing community, in the covenant life and mission of the Trinity. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus the missiological scope of the covenant of redemption is enlarged to embrace the Church as the members and instruments of Christ in the covenant of grace. In baptism the Church is united to Christ, and becomes the instruments of His ongoing fulfilment of the covenantal role laid upon him from eternity. In short, the *missio ecclesiae* has become a subset of the one *missio Dei*. 'It is exactly in the Trinitarian life that we find the archetype of the historical covenants',<sup>52</sup> says Berkhof; the historical outworking of the missionary plan of God in the covenants arises from, and is patterned after, the pre-temporal covenant within God himself.

Turning to contemporary trends in missiology we note a significant paradigm shift paralleling this conception of the grounds and patterns for Christian mission. Bosch, speaking of the 1952 Willingen Conference notes that here, perhaps for the first time in modern missiology,

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put into the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the '*missio Dei*' as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.<sup>53</sup>

This fresh insight in modern missiology dovetails well with the systematic-theological and redemptive-historical insights of Reformed theology and, through the concept of the covenant of redemption, can help establish a robust reformed theology of mission.<sup>54</sup> In considering the task

---

<sup>52</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London, 1971), p. 266.

<sup>53</sup> D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York, 2002), p. 390.

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, there are signs that this is an emphasis to which contemporary Reformed theologians are not insensitive. Clowney can write, 'Mission expresses' the purpose for which Christ came into the world, and the

of church planting we must understand how it fits into the participation of the Church in the *missio Dei*.

***Incarnation, contextualisation, and church planting***

The heart of the covenantal *missio Dei* was the sending of the Son, the Incarnation. Thus, if the covenant of redemption is the archetype of the historical covenants, and the *missio Dei* is the model for the *missio ecclesiae*, then the incarnation is more than the defining event of history; it is also the great paradigm for the missionary methods of the Church. Newbigin's comment here is apposite,

Even Jesus himself speaks of his words and works as not his own but those of the Father. His teaching is the teaching of the Father, and his mighty works are the work of the Father... the mighty works of Jesus are the works of God's kingly power, of his Spirit. So also with the disciples. It is the Spirit who will give them power and the Spirit who will bear witness. It is not that they must speak and act, asking the help of the Spirit to do so. It is rather that in their faithfulness to Jesus they become the place where the Spirit speaks and acts.<sup>55</sup>

Jesus' words and works were given to him by the Father and done in dependence upon the Spirit. So it must be with his Church. Further, when we recognise that the incarnation involved, from beginning to end, a ministry of self-denial with the twin foci of service to God, and service for the world, the shape of the mission of the Church becomes clearer. Christ's mission was a ministry of complete self-giving and self-negation. When we ask how, when faced with a Scottish society increasingly removed from the church's modernist institutions and traditional target groups, can it best live up to this incarnational paradigm, the answer must surely lead us to think of church planting.

To establish a new church should signal a desire to en-flesh the life of the Body of Christ in a fresh, risky, and perhaps costly way in a new community and environment. It implies a facing up to the mandate and imperatives laid upon the Church by the current situation and the biblical witness. Above all, it demonstrates a resolve to pattern ourselves, in our life together, after our Saviour. It is the church that is sensitive to the Bible's plot-line that will embody its central drama before the world in

---

purpose for which he sends us into the world. His purpose is the purpose of the Father' (*The Church*, p.161).

<sup>55</sup> L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (London, 1991), pp. 117-18.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

planting new churches. It will enact the gospel it proclaims, clothing itself with the concerns and perspectives of the people it seeks to reach, while pointing beyond these to the ultimate concern of God for them in Christ, and it will do so most physically and demonstrably when it finds ways to reproduce itself throughout Scotland.

Following from this, church planting in today's Scotland must be an expression of an attempt to follow Christ in standing against societal evils as well as announcing spiritual salvation. 'Like its Lord,' writes David Bosch, 'the church-in-mission must take sides *for* life and against death, *for* justice and against oppression.'<sup>56</sup> Context therefore becomes as significant a factor in shaping the structures and ministry of a church plant as its theological presuppositions. In short, the incarnation as a paradigm *means* contextualisation, and church planting in contemporary Scotland will be an act, perhaps *the* act, of responsible contextualisation. The congregation labouring carefully to articulate truth with cultural sensitivity is the greatest 'hermeneutic of the gospel' by which the life and power of gospel truth is embodied and in which the person and work of Jesus Christ is seen. Furthermore,

Insofar as it is true to its calling it becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the 'lenses' through which they are able to understand and cope with the world.<sup>57</sup>

The Church then, enables the world to understand and respond to Christ but it also enables those it has gathered from the world to understand and cope with the reality of life while they still remain.

### *The shape of a Scottish church plant*

If the Incarnation forms the paradigm for the mission of the Church, we must therefore conceive of the Church as a self-sending, self-giving community that seeks constantly to 'become flesh and dwell amongst' new peoples and social contexts. Contextual self-reproduction is basic to the incarnational model. Such churches become hermeneutical tools that bridge the understanding gap between the social context and the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. This means that the *shape* of the church plant will grow out of a critical reflection on the social context and the biblical-theological data. In other words, 'Church planting is not Church cloning...

---

<sup>56</sup> D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 426.

<sup>57</sup> L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 227.

it will be necessary to consider to what extent the existing form of church reflects the sub-culture from which it comes. Such an evaluation is important because, in all probability, ways of relating, the process of learning, styles of leadership and decision-making structures will be different in the new area.<sup>58</sup>

Church-planting in postmodern Scotland will therefore mean the creation of radical communities where relationships are central, where acceptance of all people is unconditional, and where questions of authority, structures, and hierarchy, give way to more ultimate questions about finding God in a chaotic world. It is an undoubted strength of the church plant that its small scale, vulnerability, and outward focus, make it far more able to develop patterns of ministry that facilitate creative and redemptive interaction with today's society. It does not have the problem of inherited traditions that must be undone. It is free to engage in truly responsive incarnational mission. The reality for the majority of Scottish churches, across traditions, is that they are largely middle-aged, middle-class ghettos, longing to reach the rest of society but unwilling to face the challenges the incarnation forces upon them. We must live *for* and *among* those to whom we are called to minister. The church plant, to follow the incarnational paradigm, must strive to reach those around it, and its leaders should arise from there, and live there.<sup>59</sup>

While so much that is important in the structure and method of a church plant arises from its social context it must never lose sight of its ultimate responsibilities. It exists before all else for God and towards God. It is to be a community of disciples who live to praise and adore the Triune God. Doxology is the final goal of missiology and ecclesiology. This Godward focus should be apparent in the life of every church plant. It is, after all, to be a foretaste of the restored Eden-Sanctuary of God on earth. Its worship life should therefore be carefully developed to demonstrate and provide an experience of communion with God. That will not mean simply restating what has always been done, or arbitrarily rejecting it because it is no longer fashionable in the particular Christian sub-culture to which we belong. Rather, we must look *up* with renewed awe to our God, and *around* with renewed yearning to our society, and ask how we might ensure our praise is Christ centred, saturated with reverence and joy, while accessible

---

<sup>58</sup> S. Timmis, *Multiplying Churches* (Fearn, 2002), p. 106.

<sup>59</sup> For an excellent defence of the Incarnational model and its implications for living amongst those to whom we minister see, V. Grigg, 'Sorry! The Frontier Moved', *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, ed. H. Conn (Grand Rapids, 1997), pp. 154 ff.

## CHURCH PLANTING IN TODAY'S SCOTLAND

and intelligible to those among whom we live and serve. Once again, the freedom of the church plant to develop its liturgy argues powerfully for its missiological importance.

For most of us this will mean asking how far our liturgy has become identified with our church culture, denominational history and traditions, and a willingness, in a church plant situation to ask how, in an urban environment for example, can our liturgy become fully owned by *this* constituency, while retaining its God-ward focus.<sup>60</sup> While this kind of self-evaluation may be painful, it is an undoubted implication of the incarnational model. For church planting to be meaningful it cannot be 'church cloning'. It must be driven by a gospel agenda that seeks to communicate Christ across barriers of class and ethnicity. For many of our churches this is not a task that has come naturally.

Church planting is an act of obedience to the covenant-commission of the Risen Christ and as such is a participation in his continued obedience to the covenant commission he has received from the Father. This *missio Dei* calls the Church to an incarnational model of mission which, we have argued, must result in the establishing of new congregations rooted in their local contexts which, with sensitivity to the imperatives of the gospel and the learning-styles of the surrounding culture, both model and proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified. This will certainly mean a reassessment of the forms and traditions of church structure and liturgy, but above all it will mean a movement towards fresh usefulness in the ongoing programme of the Triune God for the gathering of the nations into his Church, that there they might participate together in the praise of the Sanctuary being rebuilt in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>60</sup> For an insightful treatment of the questions of worship and postmodernity see, Drane, *McDonaldization*, pp. 85-111. Drane is challenging, but in our view seeks to shape the worship of the church around the concerns of postmodernity, rather than around the primary aims for which it is instituted. We rather believe that true worship is Godward. It is not a 'celebration of the faith'. It is the expression of adoration and reverence for *God* revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus his concerns must meet and interact with ours, but ours are always subordinate to his. It is God and his Word that must shape our praise therefore.