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IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT -  
NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON WORLD, CHURCH  
AND MISSION. M.H. Cressey

This paper began with a contribution to theological conversations sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1973-77); the preparation and revising of it were also among the stimuli which led to the lectures on 'Covenant and Hope' recently given by the writer at the Union Theological College, Belfast. The purpose of the paper is to provide a broad view of the relations between church and world. It is presented in the hope that Christians today can achieve a considerable degree of agreement on this theme which will enable them to come closer to one another in discerning the right way of fulfilling their discipleship in today's situation of mission. Dr. Thaut, then Director of the Hamburg Baptist Seminary, made the point, in one of the Baptist/Reformed meetings, that this situation itself provides a new context for agreement, for whereas our ancestors saw their situation from quite different standpoints, the Reformed emphasising the planting of the church which had already taken place and the Baptists the continuing call to mission, there is today a general recognition that large numbers of our fellow-citizens in every country of the world are either alienated from Christian faith or have never been adequately confronted with its challenge.

While the paper will concentrate on relating some New Testament material to this new situation, often described by the phrase 'mission in six continents', it may be useful by way of introduction to refer back to the earlier differences. Even in the time of the Reformation there were those who saw clearly the missionary imperative; Erasmus urged the duty of evangelising the whole world and Adrianus Saravia, a Reformed pastor at Antwerp and Brussels, a

professor at Leyden, and later Dean of Westminster (?), published in 1590 a treatise on the ministry of the gospel which commends the carrying on of the missionary work of the apostles. Yet, on the one hand, this vision was directed outside Europe and, on the other hand, it was repudiated by other Reformed leaders both because they denied the need for any special agency for the conversion of the heathen and on the ground that the missionary command ceased with the apostles (cf. 'History of Christian Missions', C.H. Robinson, Edinburgh, 1915, p.43). When William Carey as a Baptist pastor issued in 1792 'An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use means for the conversion of the Heathens', he knew that he had to argue first for the obligation ('whether the commission given by our Lord to his Disciples be not still binding on us'), secondly for the use of means as against those who held that the conversion of the heathen was the work of God alone without the industry of men, and thirdly (the point most relevant for our present purpose) for a recognition (1892 Facsimile Reprint, p.66) that 'the face of most Christian countries presents a dreadful scene of ignorance, hypocrisy, and profligacy. Various baneful, and pernicious errors appear to gain ground, in almost every part of Christendom: the truths of the gospel, and even the gospel itself, are attacked, and every method that the enemy can invent is employed to undermine the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. All these things are loud calls to Christians, and especially to ministers, to exert themselves to the utmost in their several spheres of action, and to try to enlarge them as much as possible. Just as we noted the voices of Reformed preachers like Saravia raised in the call to mission, so we must remind ourselves that there were Baptists who opposed Carey's plans. Carey does, however, stand as an example of concern for mission both at home and abroad in face of an indifference sometimes rationalised into a hyper-Calvinist theology.

Today Reformed and Baptist alike, with very few exceptions, would accept the arguments of Carey's 'Enquiry.' They see the work of God in Christ for our salvation as creating a responsibility for the proclamation and communication of the gospel, a responsibility which must be discharged in Europe and North America just as much as in Africa, Asia and Latin America or the isles of the Pacific Ocean. This view is shared also by the Second Vatican Council when it declares ('Ad Gentes', para. 6): 'In this missionary activity of the Church various stages are sometimes found side by side: first, that of the beginning or planting, then that of newness or youth. When these stages have passed, the Church's missionary activity does not cease. Rather, there lies upon the particular Churches which are already set up the duty of continuing this activity and of preaching the gospel to those still outside....Thus, missionary activity among the nations differs from pastoral activity exercised among the faithful, as well as from undertakings aimed at restoring unity among Christians. And yet these other two activities are most closely connected with the missionary zeal of the church....'

If this is where Christians all stand today, we are ready for reexamination of the New Testament material on church and world which in the past has been seen through the 'spectacles' of our varied understandings of the situation of our churches. We shall take two examples of the New Testament material, the seventeenth chapter of St. John's Gospel and the fifth chapter of 1 Corinthians. In the first we shall consider the world as distinct from the community of faith and in the second the world as it invades that community.

### The 'Kosmos' in the Fourth Gospel

The phrases of our title, 'in the world' and 'not of the the world', are derived from the

prayer of Jesus in John 17. 'I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee' (v.11): 'the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world' (v.14). Other verses important for the understanding of the meaning here are verse 9, "I am praying for them" (the disciples); 'I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me', and verses 20 and 21, 'I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.'

If we are to use the phrases of our title in speaking of church and world today, we will be wise to start from these original uses, since otherwise we may confuse ourselves and others.

There is a general recognition (cf. Kittel TWNT, Arndt/Gingrich) that the specifically Johannine usage of the word 'kosmos' ('world') emphasises not simply the neutral or even the noble fact that the universe and the world of humankind exhibit order, but rather the tragic corruption by which this very order, so dear to the Greek philosophers, is now ranged against the purposes of God and the Christ whom He has sent. 'The whole world is in the power of the evil one' (1 Jn.5.19); so 'do not love the world or the things in the world' (1 Jn.2.13). On the other hand the 'kosmos' is the object of God's redeeming love (Jn.3.16). In Jn.17 these two aspects of the 'kosmos' as opposed to God, yet the object of His love, are in subtle interplay.

From the many commentators we select two (neither Baptist nor Reformed!) to show the problem more clearly. Loisy, the Roman Catholic modernist (*Le Quatrième Évangile*, Picard, Paris, 1903) sees a double usage. 'If, on the one hand, the world is the realm of Satan, it is, on the other hand, the theatre where the divine purposes

work themselves out, where the work of salvation must continue through the preaching of the gospel... This world which must believe and know that the Christ was sent by God is not the world for which Jesus was just now declining to pray. In so far as the world is delivered over to Satan, is constituted by unbelieving and reprobate humanity, Jesus does not pray for the world. In so far as the world is the setting in which the children of God come together, Jesus prays that the world may acknowledge God and His Christ' (pp.807 and 812, my translation). This is to understand the later reference to the world in verse 21, and the gospel of Jn.3.16, in the light of verses 9 and 14; it is not the world itself that is loved or that comes to believe but only the elect within it, now hidden from view but soon to become manifest as the preaching of the disciples begins to bear fruit. We may call this type of exegesis 'world-denying' rather than 'world-affirming', though we shall need to return to this other and modern contrast later.

Rudolf Bultmann ('The Gospel of John, Eng. Tr., Blackwell, Oxford, 1971, p.508') sees verse 15 as the exegetical key - 'I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one'. "These words", he says, "are directed against two things. First, against the primitive Christian expectation of the imminence of the end, and the longing for the glorious Parousia, which will make the community an 'ecclesia triumphans'; no, the church's essential nature involves being the eschatological community in which the world is annulled within the world. Secondly, the words are directed against the temptation that continually threatens the community, viz. of falling back into the world's hands; the community must not allow itself to be misled through the world's hatred into being disloyal to its essential nature; it must not allow itself to become engrossed in its place in world-history, or regard itself as a factor of cultural importance,

or find itself in a synthesis with the world and make peace with the world". Bultmann can then continue at verse 21 (p.514). -"If there is such an eschatological community in the cosmos, in history, then there is always a possibility of faith for the world. The community is of course always a cause of irritation for the world, and can always inflame its anger (v.14). But this means that the possibility of deciding for the Revealer is also always given to it, and this was and always will be the means of overcoming the offence.... And that is why the prayer for the community is at the same time an intercession for the world, in which (as verse 18 has already said) the community has been set its task." Here is 'world-affirming' faith which shows up in exegesis. The world is not simply the 'massa perditionis' from which the elect are to be called out but rather the permanent possibility of salvation.

It is not that Loisy and Bultmann ( and other exegetes who resemble one or other of them) are here in direct contradiction; rather they are examining the material each in a different order. Yet the consequences of following one order rather than the other can be very considerable when exegesis leads to action. To see the world negatively, as that from which, out of which the elect are to be called, can lead to a 'world-denying' style of living much more extensive in its effects than the particular exegesis - or Calvinist theology itself! The structures and even the beauty of the 'kosmos' are then treated only as temptations, as the sparkle on the surface of deep waters in which we shall easily be drowned. To see the world positively, as that place where the possibility of decision for God is ever present, enables a 'world-affirming' style of living, again not logically entailed by the exegesis, but somehow stimulated by it. Then the structures and beauty of the 'kosmos' are seen as the fitting background for the decision,

marred indeed and 'denatured' if the decision goes otherwise, but ready for, longing for redemption along with the manifestation of the sons of God (cf. Romans 8). We may further compare the two exegeses in terms of two of the parables of the kingdom: is the Church's work more like fishing, getting the fish out of the water, or more like farming, growing the plants in the soil (cf. Matt.13., 24-30 and 47-49)? Perhaps the fact that these two parables are placed so near one another in Matthew may suggest that we need both 'world-denying' and 'world-affirming' elements in a balanced Christian appraisal of the world. This would confirm Bultmann's use of verse 15 in Jn.17 as the key. When we become too other-worldly like the Thessalonians, we are to be recalled to the field of the world: when we become too earth-bound, we are to be reminded that our hope is fixed on God and not on the 'kosmos', whose structures and beauty, whose 'form', 'passes away'. (1 Cor. 7. 31).

What seems evident to me, at least, is that as we consider the 'in the world/not of the world' tension, our positions are not predictable simply by whether we are Reformed or Baptist (or whatever), but that on these questions a debate is equally proceeding in each of our world families of churches.

### Holiness and Worldliness

The second passage we shall examine raises a different issue, the invasion or infiltration of the church by worldly values and behaviour. 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men: not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber-- not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those



inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Drive out the wicked person from among you.' (1 Cor.5.9-13)

In this respect also the Baptist/Reformed Theological Conversations found evidence of a past division of judgment and practice; in the summary of one of the meetings it was said 'The Reformed tradition emphasises the aspect of 'Heilsgemeinde' and the thought of the church as also 'corpus permixtum'. It understands mission as an activity pervading all realms of life and society by the gospel. The Baptist tradition emphasises the aspect of mission.. and the thought of the church as 'gathered believers' committed to the task of proclaiming the gospel to each individual". Although we also agreed "that these emphases are not mutually exclusive", they seem to be directly connected with the question of the church as a holy community in relation to justification, a question seen as a sensitive area for discussion in our programme of 1974.

The problem may be put like this. Neither tradition has adopted an antinomian stance which could ignore or fail to deal with the kind of open immorality of which Paul had heard in the Corinthian church; but so far as it is possible to generalise in the summarising of our findings (and that may not be very far!), there does seem to be a tendency for Baptists to apply Paul's teaching about withholding fellowship in relation to matters which Reformed churches have seen as regrettable evidence indeed of 'tares among the wheat' but not as so evil as to require separation from their perpetrators. If this is so, what are the reasons for it?

One answer might be that it is precisely our different baptismal practices that lead to these different responses to Paul's counsel. Prædo-baptists, it might be said, have to cope with the presence in the membership of the church of those who, declared to be members by the sign of baptism, have never come to personal faith, which

as it appropriates justification is able to experience sanctifying grace; those who baptise only believers have a more immediate expectation that sanctifying grace will be evidently at work in them and apply correspondingly more severe discipline to 'drive out the wicked person'. While there is clearly some force in this line of argument, it is weakened by the reflection that some paedobaptist churches, e.g. the Church of Scotland at certain periods, have exercised a very strict discipline and have had the very highest expectations concerning the working out of the implications of baptism within the families of those within the covenant of grace, whereas elsewhere believers' baptist communities have become lax in discipline even to the point of what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace', so that other Baptists felt obliged to withhold fellowship from them.

We must therefore examine another possibility, that the difference in discipline arises from a difference of response to the situation of Christendom and post-Christendom. This would fit with the observation that Baptist/Reformed tension has been most evident in 'Christendom' situations in different parts of the world, ranging from the 'volkskirche' of Germany to the Christian communalism of some parts of India. In such cases there is an inter-play of the 'world-denying' and 'world-affirming' styles of Christian living with the confused position of the 'Christian ruler', 'Christian country', 'Christian community'. While it may be readily possible to achieve some balance or consensus in views of the world as distinct from the church, agreement is much less easy in face of the ruler, state or communal body which claims the name of Christian, upholds some Christian values, sustains some Christian instruction, and yet also functions in many ways like the rulers, states or communities of 'this world'.

It was in Christendom that the differentiated Reformed and Baptist traditions arose. The

Reformed were neither ignorant of nor insensitive to the problems of an undisciplined church; they saw the New Testament line running from the appropriation of justification to the working out of salvation under the guidance of the 'third use' of the law. The Anabaptists and later the Baptists pressed more eagerly for the purging out of corruption, believing that talk of 'tares and wheat' growing together till the judgment was a right description of the field which is the world but not of the church. Thus Reformed and Baptist might and often did agree on the advantages of living under beneficent rule and just laws; they took different paths in pastoral activity exercised among the faithful.

### Half-Believers

But who are 'the faithful'? Is it enough to describe the difference between Reformed and Baptist practice as that between a lenient and a strict application of the third use of the law? Baptists could accept Calvin's description of the third use: it 'has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the Law is written and engraven on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, though they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit in the Law. For it is the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what the will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge...Then, because we need not doctrine merely, but exhortation also, the servant of God will derive this further advantage from the Law: by frequently meditating upon it, he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin' (Inst.II.vii.12). And though both Reformed and Baptist can fall into legalism, both surely agree that this third use of the law is not what justifies us, any more than the first or second uses of the law.

But the problem lies in that word 'believers' at the beginning of the quotation from Calvin. Even if that word be extended to the believing family and the incipient faith of 'Christian children' (in terms of Donald Baillie's use of that last phrase; 'Theology of the Sacraments', Faber, p.82), are there not to be found in the churches of Christendom whether in the sixteenth century or today many names on church rolls of those who are not, perhaps never have been, believers in any meaningful sense?

Here an interview cited in the preparatory material for the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches may be helpful. Manoel de Mello, founder of 'Brazil for Christ Movement' is being questioned about evangelism. "More than 99% of the Brazilians are already converted. It is almost impossible to meet a Brazilian who does not believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour, in God, in the Holy Spirit.... Someone comes to my church and says: Missionary, I brought this couple to the service; they are not 'believers'. But they are believers, as you will see. 'Do you believe in Jesus Christ?' 'I believe'. As far as believing is concerned, they believe, except that they do not practise the same faith. In fact we, the evangelicals, have perhaps turned away more people from the Kingdom of God than we have won, because of certain expressions which we have invented, such as 'So-and-so is not converted, So-and-so is not saved. So-and-so is not a believer.' And that spirit astonishes and alienates people". (Section 1 Dossier for Nairobi, p.39).

Manoel de Mello here challenges us all to face the evangelistic/pastoral task of such a 'Christendom' situation as still exists in many places. We have operated in the past with a sharp distinction between that kind of belief which 'even the demons' share 'and shudder' (Jas.2.19) and the 'faith working through love' of which Paul speaks (Gal.5.6). It is the latter faith that the Reformed have looked for in parents who

present their infant children for baptism and that Baptists have sought in the candidates for baptism as believers. But the couple whom de Mello presents to us, while clearly not committed in faith in that sense, are so far related to Jesus Christ through their traditional knowledge of him and the thought-pattern of their society that to repulse them as 'unbelievers' becomes evangelistically and pastorally dubious. Even if we assume that being born again in faith is an event that can be dated (at least by God if not by us), it is a different matter evangelistically and pastorally to bring such believers as de Mello's couple, who may well have been baptised as infants, to a point of full commitment in faith, than it is to do the same for one who himself acknowledges that he starts as an unbeliever or an adherent of some other religion. Here, as in the matter of generally 'world-denying' or 'world-affirming' views, it seems to me that we are involved in a common quest rather than in a sharply defined clash of church traditions. For, on the one hand, in all our traditions there is a variety of responses to the confused beliefs of our fellow-citizens, and, on the other hand, as I wish now to argue, there is no direct road to an answer to these problems from our baptismal doctrines and practices.

To summarise my position so far, it is that Reformed and Baptist (and many others) are now at a point in their history where they are already separately considering certain problems - attitude to the world, exercise of discipline, approach to half-believers, - that on these problems there is diversity of conclusions in each of our traditions, and that we had better keep working on them, exegetically, systematically and pragmatically, in a joint enterprise.

But what now becomes of the stated intention of the Baptist/Reformed Theological Conversations, formulated at the first meeting, 'to treat our particular convictions about baptism in a way

which illuminates their relation to, and consequential nature within, a total understanding of theology and of the church's task today'? I want to suggest that, whatever has been the integrated nature of our past theologies, the placing of our baptismal doctrines and practices is now much more problematic in relation to the contemporary situation and understanding.

### Baptism and Mission

The problems summarised above as concerning attitude to the world, exercise of discipline and approach to half-believers, all involve an appraisal of mission. Since it is God who sends the church on its mission, the last sentence could be rephrased to speak of an appraisal of what God is doing in the world to-day. Let us look briefly at some possible forms of such appraisal and their consequences for baptismal practice.

Our attitude to 'the world', used here in a more neutral sense than in the Fourth Gospel, may be on the one hand that it is drifting or in places rushing into a chaotic end or organising itself for a final defiance of God's purposes, or on the other hand that despite all its follies, tragedies and sins it bears the marks, particularly where Christian influence has been felt, of the working out of the divine purposes. But the adoption of one or other of these views does not settle the question of how best to rescue men and women from 'the world' or of how best to establish them as unambiguous witnesses for the divine purposes elsewhere ambiguously present. Paedobaptists can argue either that the familial character of their rite separates off the family of faith or that it prefigures the family of mankind; believers' baptists can argue that the voluntary act of the believer is the mark either of his stepping out of the world or of his testimony to that world concerning its own hidden destiny.

Secondly, exercises of discipline can, as we pointed out earlier (p.9) be strict or lenient in either practice.

Thirdly, in approach to half-believers, paedobaptists can argue that their practice creates a basis for growth of the family unit towards mature faith, while they can also be criticised for letting half-believers and their children remain half-pagans; believers' baptists can argue that their practice sets before the half-believers a clear challenge to full commitment, while they can be criticised as repulsing incipient faith by appearing to deny to it any reality, 'astonishing and alienating' people.

I conclude that the question of baptismal practice cannot any longer be settled, even if it could have been in the past, as part of a general view of the church's task, but must be resolved, after all, by a direct dealing with baptismal doctrine, in particular the relation of baptism to faith in the order of events in time. This topic is the subject of many contemporary Faith and Order discussions.

### A Possible New Perspective

It would be unhelpful to close on the note of 'passing the buck' to those preparing other reports! There is, I believe, a possible new perspective within which we might pursue the joint study advocated above. This is the perspective offered by the discussion of the church as 'sacrament, sign and instrument', brought out, for instance, in part of the report of the Faith and Order Consultation at Salamanca in September 1973, in which Reformed and Baptist participants played an active role along with colleagues from other churches.

The report says (cf. The Ecumenical Review, April 1974) - "the terms 'sacrament' and 'sign' refer to the mystery of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.. But in the course of history, the terms have also been used for the community of those who believe in Him. Because this community is an integral part of the mystery of God's action in bringing about His Kingdom, it is, in a

derivative sense, 'sacrament' and 'sign' in history; reflecting God's purpose and promise to all people. As the Church communicates the Gospel, it is 'sign' in the sense of instrument. It contributes to the salvation and communion of people with God in Jesus Christ".

"When the Church is called 'sacrament' and 'sign'," the report continues, "there cannot be any thought of identifying the Church and the Kingdom of God as if the Church had already arrived at its goal and thus embodied the fulness of God's gift in its historical existence. It is no more than a sign indicating the reality of God's purpose for the world. It might even be said that the sign is often hidden because Christians are disobedient to their call and divided in their response. The Church must confess that it shares in and contributes to the brokenness of the world. The Church is a sign which constantly needs to be made visible. Therefore, the Church must constantly look at the ways in which its sign character has been obscured and needs to be restored."

If we add that as instrument the Church must not be confounded with that world in which it is to be instrumental, we may find in the language of these Salamanca paragraphs a hint for the formulation of a programme which requires equal emphasis on 'not of the world' (that the 'sacrament', 'sign', instrument may be effective) and on 'in the world' (that the 'sacrament', 'sign', instrument may in all its effectiveness actually communicate, illuminate and bring change).

At least it was appropriate to explore such thoughts as we sat at the Baptist Seminary in Ruschlikon in peace and looked across the lake to the busy life of Zurich. This paper may serve to illustrate what I believe to be the essential interrelations of New Testament study, systematic theology, inter-church dialogue and involvement in the world which God loves.