

THE WHITLEY LECTURE
2005

LIBERATING ECCLESIOLOGY

Setting the church free
to live out its missionary nature

Andrew Rollinson

Whitley Publications

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The Whitley Lecture

The Whitley Lecture was first established in 1949, in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861-1947), the Baptist historian. Whitley was a notable scholar and pastor in both England and Australia. Following a pastorate in Bridlington, during which he also taught at Rawdon College in Yorkshire, he became the first principal of the Baptist College of Victoria in Melbourne (Australia) in 1891. This institution was subsequently renamed Whitley College in his honour. Returning to England after eleven years in Australia, he was a leading and influential figure in the denomination during the early part of the twentieth century. His *History of British Baptists* (1923) is still an important source of information and comment for contemporary historians.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society in 1908. He edited its journal, which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents - a reputation it still enjoys nearly a century later as the *Baptist Quarterly*. Altogether Whitley made an important contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding, providing a model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the Lectureship in his name was intended to be an encouragement to research and writing by Baptist scholars into aspects of Christian life and thought, and to enable the results of this work to be published. This has involved supporting designated lecturers and the making of grants. The Management Committee, which consists of representatives of the British Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, BMS World Mission, the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society, is always keen to hear about work being done by Baptist scholars, and is prepared to consider offering advice and practical support.

In 1996, the Committee agreed to appoint each year a leading Baptist scholar as the Whitley Lecturer to write and deliver a lecture as a contribution to Baptist thought. Since then, the lecture has been

inherently self-righting; that is to say, is there not lying within a true Baptist and biblical understanding of the church a vision and energy for mission which needs unlocking? My modest hope is that by doing a 'design check' on the way we conceive of church we may at least identify certain design faults which, if attended to, could lead to self-righting, that is to a liberation of the church to fulfil its true missionary nature.² The need for this, in my opinion, is underlined by the fact that in the welcome rise of 'experimental' and 'emerging' church, ecclesiological way-markers are few and far between. 'Liquid church' may be the order of the day, but the worrying impression is sometimes left that cultural adaptability is almost the only determinative factor.³

This exploration, of course, is predicated on the conviction, increasingly acknowledged over the last fifty years, that ecclesiology is essentially missionary,⁴ as well as mission being crucially (if not exclusively)⁵ ecclesial. The church is to be seen as the *result* of God's mission before it is seen as the *instrument* of his mission. As Moltmann puts it, 'It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil to the world. It is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father,

Ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. Baker Academic, 2003

- 2 Michael Northcott, in a series of articles looking at urban mission concludes that one weakness is that 'they undervalued the role of the church qua church'. Michael Northcott *Urban Theology 1960-1990 Part 1, Crucible*, Oct-Dec 1990 p.164
- 3 Pete Ward. *Liquid Church*, Hendrickson, Paternoster Press, 2002. taking his cue from the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's distinction between 'solid modernity' and today's post-modernism or 'liquid modernity'.
- 4 David J. Bosch *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 1991 p 372 He quotes Ad Gentes (Vatican II statement) 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature'. p.9
- 5 Lesslie Newbigin, in his *An Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*, Edinburgh, St Andrew's Press, 1993 notes that his early writings on mission were 'too exclusively church-centred.... Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate, setting the work of Christ in the Church in the context of the overruling providence of the Father in all the life of the world and the sovereign freedom of the Spirit who is the Lord and not the auxiliary of the Church'. p.187

creating the church as it goes on its way'.⁶ Thus, there is something about the very *esse* of church, which is missional.⁷ In a recent Anglican report, '*Mission-shaped Church*', one commentator encourages us to read these three words as a simple but profound sentence – *mission shaped church* - a story theologically normative for the whole church.⁸ It is to be noted that this is not the same as saying that the *activity* of mission is always to be the first priority of the church. It is rather to assert that the very being of the Christian church, expressed in a communal life of worship and service, arises from, is fundamentally shaped by, and is to be orientated towards the sending and redeeming love of the Triune God.⁹

There are two key areas in which I want to invite reflection. First, I want to look briefly at the methodological path we usually take (particularly as Baptists) to arrive at our ecclesiology. Second, I want to attempt to examine, in a more ecumenical context, the *key starting points* for contemporary ecclesiology, and reflect on the effect they have on our missionary vision. As a disclaimer, it is important to acknowledge that church leadership is a hugely important factor in the formation and nurture of missionary congregations, but this is not going to be part of my remit here.

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- 6 Jurgen Moltmann *The Church in the Power of the Spirit. A contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. London SCM 1977. p.64
 - 7 Eberhard Jungel, 'If the church had a heart, a living, beating heart, its pulse would be regulated by mission and evangelism; and any deficiencies in the church's missionary activity would immediately lead to serious cardio-vascular disturbances'. *International Review of Mission* Vol. LXXXIX No.353 April 2000
 - 8 George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge*, No 22 Mission-shaped Church: The Inside and Outside View p.19
 - 9 The argument as to whether 'worship' or 'mission' is the church's first calling is an unhelpful dichotomy. Worship arises out of a community being won and wooed by God's seeking love, and mission is always to be undertaken as an expression of worship.

Part One: Ecclesiological methodology – one possible cause of our problems?

It is perhaps helpful to begin by outlining four ways in which ecclesiology has traditionally been approached. This, it seems to me, may offer clues as to why certain impediments to a truly missionary church have arisen. Each approach is to be judged by its ability to set the church free to fulfil its biblical goals. The first approach is what we can call *comparative or descriptive ecclesiology*. This is best represented by two classic and influential works: Paul Minear's *Images of the Church in the New Testament*,¹⁰ where he expounds a mind-boggling ninety-six biblical images and metaphors of the church, and Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*,¹¹ outlining six historical paradigms: those of 'sacrament', 'herald', 'institution', 'mystical communion', 'servant' and 'community of disciples'. The value of such approaches is that they offer complementary ways of both explaining and exploring the meaning of church. They are not meant to be integrated to produce one synthesised vision (there is no underlying 'super-model', says Dulles); but to characterise the church as essentially a mystery, a divine self-gift, expressed and incarnated in a rich diversity of ways.¹² But although these images and models both root us in Scripture and are helpfully evocative in stirring the imagination for mission, I judge that the very multiple-option approach can somehow take away an overall energising effect.¹³

10 Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1960

11 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Doubleday and Co, Garden City, New York, 1974

12 Some have sought to argue for a two-fold ontological structure to the church, an underlying reality, and an empirical expression. Dulles, however, warns against seeing the essence of the church 'like a dark continent, ready-made and waiting only to be mapped'. *ibid* p.187

13 See the analysis in Nicholas M. Healy *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, C.U.P 2000 p.37ff. In part this is because, as Healy says, 'blueprint ecclesiologies frequently display a curious inability to acknowledge the complexities of ecclesial life in its pilgrim state' p.37

A second approach is what we could call *historical and developmental ecclesiology*. This is the most common perspective, defining the church of a given period over against its wider historical context, and slowly building a distinctive doctrine of the church. Classically, for example, the 'marks of the true church', so dear to Reformed ecclesiology, are defined over against Mediaeval Catholicism and then later refined. Our own Baptist self-understanding is partially, if not largely, forged in this way. The obvious danger here, however, is that precisely because much of our ecclesiology has been shaped by a culture and a context other than our own, we end up with ecclesial patterns skewed by time. Of course, the best of this tradition believes in *ecclesia semper reformanda*, but what, it still has to be asked, will guide a mission-shaped reforming of the church? As Newbigin often pointed out, this whole approach becomes deeply problematic in today's post-Christendom culture when the understanding of the church being worked with was largely forged in other than a pagan and truly missionary setting.¹⁴

A third approach is that of *primitivism* and *restorationism*, seeking to draw an ecclesiology from the earliest Christian communities recorded in the Scriptures. Here our Anabaptist cousins are a prime example, firmly believing as they did that the New Testament is clear not only regarding the content of the Christian Faith, but also regarding the pattern of the 'true church' (*rechte Kirche*). Thus we find, for example, Conrad Grebel admonishing Thomas Muntzer to build a church 'on only what may be found in pure and clear Scripture'. Their working narrative begins with the story of an original ecclesiological Eden, (with its heroes, its pacificism, its communal living, its simplicity and, of course, its believers' baptism,) followed by a 'fall' (variously located in history) and needing therefore a *restitutio ecclesiae*, the recovery of the life and virtues of the earliest church. This is to be distinguished from the *reformatio* of the magisterial Reformers.

For ourselves too, with our own inherent biblicism, this approach

14 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, SCM 1953 p.2

has continued, and in many ways served us well. The Book of Acts with its description of the earliest community devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer; with its vision of Spirit-led mission and scattered believers gossiping the gospel, has deeply affected us. Having said that, however, not only are the hermeneutical dangers of restorationism obvious (ignoring the sheer diversity and flaws of the earliest communities¹⁵), but there is the perennial pitfall of attempting a merely mechanical, unreflective and powerless transposing of the past.

Recently, there has been an interesting convergence of views about an alternative approach to the three above. This approach is what I will call, (following Hans Urs von Balthasar, and picked up by Nicholas Healy)¹⁶, a *theo-dramatic approach*. Von Balthasar makes a distinction between 'epic theology', where we step outside the drama and take an external spectator's view, and 'dramatic theology' where we take the perspective of being participants in the drama. Divine revelation, says Balthasar, is 'dramatic at the core', with Christ's work *pro nobis* drawing us into the Father's drama through the agency of the Spirit. This is not a 'puppet play', with us as helpless marionettes, but rather God graciously 'creates space on the stage' for us to play our part as a free response to his grace. In terms of ecclesiology, such an approach involves returning to the narrative of the early church, not with simplistic restorationist intent, but in order to discern, by the Spirit, the core theological values and then to re-appropriate, by the Spirit, those values in a very different culture and time. Just as an orchestra interprets the musical score, so the church is a 'communal performance of Scripture',¹⁷ with *God himself* enabling, empowering and shaping his people.

15 See Raymond Brown *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. New York, Paulist Press, 1984

16 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory Vols. 1-5*, trans. Graham Harrison, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988-1998, quoted in Nicholas M. Healy Chapter 3 p.52f

17 Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Leicester, 1998 p.440

The value of this approach generally and, in particular, for renewing the church in mission is at least three-fold. First, and most importantly, it allows the primary focus to be on the being and ways of the Triune God, the Father who, in Christ, first called out his *ecclesia* and continues to do so by his Spirit.¹⁸ I am deeply convinced that the church is *primarily* energised in its mission, neither by reading the inspired story of the first missionary communities (inspiring though it is), nor by learning from the great periods of our missionary history (stirring though they are), *but by a renewed vision and experience of the missionary God himself*. Any ecclesiology that results in our focus being taken off the Living God himself will become an aberrant ecclesiology.¹⁹ Any theology of the church that does not draw us in to

18 Colin Gunton, '....the manifold inadequacy of the theology of the church derives from the fact that it has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune' *On being the church* .p. 48

19 The importance of this approach is well illustrated in an eloquent analysis by Michael Crowley of the contemporary church scene in Latin America (Brazil and Chile in particular); *Ecclesial Mission. Critical lessons from Latin America on ways of being church*, in *Mission and Spirituality*. Ed. Howard Mellor and Timothy Yates, Cliff College Publishing, 2002. He describes how, in the last thirty years or so, there has seen a dramatic emergence of new, popular, ecclesial movements on the margins of older, imported notions of church. Established Roman Catholic ecclesial structures, Catholic ecclesial base communities, and various waves of mainline Protestant churches are all being overshadowed by the rapid growth of indigenous Pentecostal communities. These grass-root communities reacted to the traditional church forms and sought a more autonomous, locally led, Spirit-filled church. Clearly they are effective in mission, particularly appealing to the marginalized and oppressed, such that they are now credibly challenging the notion that Latin America is a predominantly Catholic continent. However Crowley's concern is to highlight that such an emerging church, though exciting, has a very functionalist ecclesiology, and so is particularly vulnerable to assimilating incongruous popular trends, and ultimately vulnerable to its own demise. 'There is an urgent need', he concludes, 'to establish a basis for ecclesial mission that derives from a theologically biblical framework of a doctrine of the triune God that addresses the ontological, transformative, and pneumatic concerns of that vision'. This is exactly my concern.

God's life, as faithful participants and obedient pilgrims will become a powerless ecclesiology. Simply to define church by the purpose that drives it, or the sort of person it seeks to attract will lead to imbalance. Secondly, this approach is crucial for renewing mission because it has an attractive simplicity and *minimalism* about it that allows *maximum contextualisation*. The primary focus is not on an ecclesial order, even less on blueprint structural and institutional patterns but on critical shaping values. Such a theo-dramatic approach will be one where culture is allowed to have a profoundly shaping effect without curtailing the values and vision of God. This, it seems to me, is exactly what constitutes a missionary church. Thirdly, this approach gives due weight to the strong eschatological dimension of biblical ecclesiology.²⁰ The true church is still to come and thus 'is not to be defined by what it is, but by the End to which it moves'.²¹ This pilgrim perspective emphasises the provisional nature of all our present ecclesial structures and ways, and so frees the church to be nimble, adaptable and responsive for mission.

At its best, our own Baptist ecclesiology is shaped by such a theo-dramatic approach. Our basic conviction is of the church as the 'provisional home' of the triune God, that community of people called out by the Father, gathered around Christ and united in his Spirit. The emphasis is not simply on the church being 'local', 'gathered' and 'believing', not only on a voluntary, confessing membership and intentional discipleship, *but on a people excited by the reality of Christ powerfully at work in their midst*. As the congregation converses, so the Risen Christ speaks; as the congregation worships, so the Exalted Lord draws near; as the congregation exercises gifts of the Spirit and lives out lives of faithful discipleship, so the reign of the King impacts others. The twin fundamental convictions are: first, that the *one and whole Christ* is known to each local congregation and second, that

20) Volf M. *After Our Likeness The Church as the Image of the Trinity* William Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge UK 1998 p.128. 'The all-embracing framework for an appropriate understanding of the church is God's eschatological new creation.'

21) Lesslie Newbigin *The Household of God*, p.23

Christ's rule is expressed in the *entirety* of the congregation. As such, the entirety of this assembly is the event-filled forum of the eschatological Spirit of Christ - a participation in the present redemptive grace of Christ and an anticipation of that final heavenly *ecclesia* in glory.²² Well, that's the theory – sorry about your last church meeting!

This theo-dramatic emphasis, in a Baptist context, finds recent expression in the writings of the American, James McClendon Jr. By provocatively publishing a volume on *Ethics* first in his systematic theology, he underscored that his working hermeneutic is that the only route to an authentic reading of Scripture is to live it. In the same way, it is only as we live out, in faithful discipleship, the theological principles of the narrative of the early church that a potent, missionary ecclesiology can be developed. His two-fold motif is 'this is that' and 'then is now'. The first is a plea for the church today to orientate itself by a continuing dialogue with the record of the earliest Christian communities in the New Testament. The second is a plea to see the church not only 'in a frame of biblical narrative, but also in a frame of biblical expectation'.²³

Part Two: Ecclesiological starting points for a missionary church – roots that refresh or beginnings that blind?

Building on these reflections, what I now want to attempt is an examination, from a Baptist perspective, of three contemporary and ecumenical approaches to systematic ecclesiology. Each is deliberately grounded in an aspect of the very being and ways of God; namely God's grace (reformed ecclesiology), God's love (communion ecclesiology) and God's reign (kingdom ecclesiology). My purpose, let me remind you, is not simply to assess the extent to which a particular imagining of the church does justice to the church's missionary nature. It is primarily to identify *what actually energises and liberates the*

22 Volf, *ibid* p.140

23 James William McClendon Jr *Systematic Theology: Vol.2, Doctrine*.

people of God for mission today. What are the ballasts for self-righting a badly listing church? It is important to emphasise that the three starting points to be analysed are not to be seen as distinct and mutually exclusive²⁴, but rather as three complementary perspectives on the church.²⁵

A. The God of Grace – Church as Gospel People

We begin where we are most familiar and comfortable, with our own reformed and Baptist concept of the church. Allow me, for a moment, to rehearse the basics. Classic Reformation ecclesiology is marked by a radical and attractive simplicity; namely, that the *essential ecclesia* is that community created by the living presence of Christ, through his word, the gospel. Where the gospel is active, in faithful preaching and celebration of the sacraments, Christ is present, and where Christ is present the church truly exists. Thus Luther writes, ‘Wherever the word of God is preached and believed, there true faith, that immovable rock, exists; where there is faith, there is the church, the bride of Christ; where the bride of Christ is, there are to be found all that he has betrothed to himself.’²⁶ It is this basic and foundational conviction that clearly unites all streams of the Reformation, from the Continental reformers to the Anabaptists, from John Knox to the Anglican divines.

24 For example, Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg Reformer, sees the church as the creation of God’s gracious Word, but also expounds the church as a communion of love (in his earliest published work,) and has a strong stress on the *Regnum Christi*. T.F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church, A Study in the Theology of the Reformers*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1956, p.74. 79.

25 There are parallels in my approach to the three-fold typology in Newbigin’s classic, *The Household of God*. He speaks of ‘the Congregation of the Faithful’, ‘the Body of Christ’ and ‘the Community of the Holy Spirit’.

26 Works of Martin Luther, quoted in Avis p.18. Equally Calvin: ‘Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the church of God has some existence, since his promise cannot fail. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst’’. Institutes IV, 1.9

As Paul Avis observes, the two questions that dominated the Reformation, 'How can I obtain a gracious God?' and 'Where can I find the true church?' are inseparably related; precisely because this gracious God reveals himself in the Gospel of Christ, and those so found in Christ are constituted by the Spirit as the church.²⁷ Again and again the transformative power of Christ through his word and Spirit was the primary focus. In Luther's *Ninety Five Theses* we find: 'The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.'

It is not surprising that such christocentric simplicity was quickly challenged. Luther faced two pressures; on the one hand, the charge of Platonism, of articulating a mere ideal, an illusory community unrelated to the real world of time and space; and, on the other hand, of needing to distinguish clearly between the protesting church and Mediaeval Catholicism. In response to this, the Reformers propounded the *notae ecclesiae*, the marks of the true church. For Luther, Melancthon and Calvin a number of marks were expounded, but these were consistently narrowed down to two, to where 'the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly' (*Augsburg Confession* 1530). This was by no means all they had to say of the church, and Calvin's ecclesiology in particular is rich and expansive.²⁸ However, it was Martin Bucer who saw with great clarity that as long as the church remained a mixed group, then the true church had also to be defined by authentic Christian discipleship. Thus, discipline became a third mark of the true church, exercised in practice by all adult members being accountable to the ruling elders.

Our own story, of course, is both happily continuous and gloriously discontinuous with all this! Our Anabaptist and later Baptist

27 Paul D.L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1981 p.1

28 Calvin was more concerned than Luther with right doctrine and a defined church order, and yet explicates the church in a fuller and more dynamic way. He views the church in terms of an external covenant between God and his people; an internal union between Christ and the believers, through the Holy Spirit, and the church's eschatological goal.

understanding of the church was nurtured in such reformed soil,²⁹ and yet what emerged was a decidedly different ecclesial plant. A decisive rejection of the *Corpus Christianum* and an insistence on a truly believer's church could hardly have produced less.³⁰

My reason for this rapid re-telling of our heritage is not simply to savour a familiar story, but rather to allow critical reflection on what this has done for a truly missionary ecclesiology. One would have assumed, as a simple matter of course, that with the magisterial reformers' re-discovery of the Gospel, intentionally missionary churches would have resulted, but this seems not to have been the case. And it is this very fact that perhaps provides pause for thought. Care is obviously needed, for in strictly historical terms the data is notoriously difficult to interpret.³¹ At face value, for example, the overwhelming evidence seems to be that the missionary dimension of early Reformation churches was strangely minimal,³² and a number of historical reasons can be enumerated to explain this.³³ And in contrast, it can be argued that European Anabaptist and early English Baptist

29 I am well aware of the debate over whether early English Baptist life was influenced by the Anabaptists or, as W.T. Whitley among others firmly believed, grew solely out of English Separatism and Congregationalism.

30 Balthasar Hubmaier, one of the most creative theologians of the radical reformation spelt out, for example, that the first mark of the true church must always be regeneration. The church was to be distinctive, the visible Body of Christ, entered into by a radical dying and rising in believers' baptism.

31 David J. Bosch, *op.cit* for a good summary of the varied views.

32 'It is clear that the idea of the steady progress of the preaching of the gospel throughout the world is not foreign to Luther's thought. Yet when everything favourable has been said that can be said and when all possible evidence from the writings of the Reformers has been collected, it all amounts to exceedingly little.' S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Harmondsworth, 1964, p.221

33 These would include: the mere fight to survive against the Church of Rome, (and fierce internal theological controversies) sapped their energy; the rejection of the monastic system (a key component of medieval mission); and the fact of no immediate contact with non-Christian peoples. Cf Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.245

churches displayed remarkable missionary zeal.³⁴ But this contrast cannot be drawn too sharply. Calvin himself, for example, set a model of missionary enterprise in his careful training of pastor-evangelists for the hostile territory of Roman Catholic France³⁵; and it perhaps needs to be asked how many of the early Anabaptist converts were religious proselytes as opposed to true pagan converts? There is perhaps enough contrast, however, to allow some reflection theologically on what, perhaps, distracts a church from mission, even when the Gospel is so apparently central. One undisputed fact is that for the Anabaptists the Great Commission was central to their thinking. No text was quoted more frequently, found in confessions of faith, court testimonies and many sermons and writings. In contrast to the reformers, the Anabaptists understood this text to be relevant for all believers of all ages. But in terms of ecclesiology *per se* there are *four inter-related issues* I want to identify and explore.

First, it seems clear that by the magisterial Reformers so emphasising the *event* of proclaiming the Gospel in word and sacrament, the focus inevitably fell more on activity (and we could say 'meetings') than on being a Gospel *community*, that is, a visible, historical, *continuing embodiment* of the Good News.³⁶ This lack was, of course, hampered further (and we may say fatally) by an ecclesiology where state and church were wedded together, and where a 'visible and invisible' church accounted for the mixed nature of the

34 For example, the early Anabaptist leader, George Blaurock from Zurich, who saw a particularly fruitful ministry in the Tyrol. From his conversion under Zwingli in 1525 until his martyrdom in 1529 he baptised at least a thousand and planted many churches. Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*. Starr King Press. Boston 1952. p.59

35 I am grateful to David Smith for an unpublished paper 'Jean de Lery – the Forgotten 'Grandfather' of Protestant Mission', the remarkable story of a French Christian humanist who responded in 1556 to Calvin's Geneva Church request to send Reformed pastors to Brazil.

36 This is well dealt with in Newbigin's *The Household of God*. pp.55-71

church.³⁷ I am convinced that one of our greatest needs today for mission fruitfulness is a (Anabaptist) re-emphasis on the church being a *visible social reality*. We are called to be 'telling communities' in both senses of the word! People need to see the Gospel embodied and lived out in order to believe it³⁸, and believers desperately need each other to be mutually resourced for mission. Such an emphasis *on credible community* challenges, of course, the deeply pervasive individualism that still grips much of our Baptist and evangelical constituency. In reality, how much of our energy is taken in keeping church activities going, even pushing forward our evangelistic strategies, rather than in building *authentic community*? There is an attractive simplicity missing from so much church life - just no time to eat, chat, listen, laugh...and cry. As Newbigin perceptively comments, 'It is precisely because the church is not merely instrumental that she can be instrumental'.³⁹

- In a recent seminar on church planting and fresh expressions of church, George Lings of the Sheffield Centre made the telling point that too many church plants begin with corporate worship. He argued that a better (and more biblical?) starting point was the creation of community. Out of such community flows mission, and in response to both there is worship.
- I heard one Church of Scotland minister say recently that if all the money we spent on evangelistic programmes was

37 Lesslie Newbigin. 'Most writings about the church still fail primarily by failing to grasp the truth that Luther enunciated when he said that justification by faith is the article by which the Church stands or falls. Yet by substituting at this critical point for the true and biblical dialectic of holy and sinful, a false and unbiblical dialectic of outward and inward, visible and invisible, Luther himself helped profoundly to confuse the issue of the Reformation. *Household of God* p.67

38 Lesslie Newbigin's famous dictum is still crucial 'The only hermeneutic of the Gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it'. *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. p.227

39 L. Newbigin

channelled, instead, into providing every member of the congregation with a hospitality allowance then our mission would be far more effective! How we need to re-discover being human, where church is a place of eating, laughter and friendship.

Second, it seems clear in hindsight that the Reformers gave the church an unhelpful lead by defining the church as ‘where the Gospel is *purely* taught and the sacraments *rightly* administered’. Though the intent of this is clear, as the magisterial Reformers sought to define the ‘true church’ over against medieval Catholicism, it has, in fact, led to an undue emphasis on an intellectual understanding of faith and an underplaying of the *dynamic of provocative Gospel living*⁴⁰ that such faith should produce. Right doctrine became more dominant than right relationships. Hearing and believing the Gospel took precedence over living and modelling the Gospel.⁴¹ In parts of Scotland I sometimes see the acrimonious, mission-damaging consequences of a Reformed church that has privileged right belief over reconciling love and risk-taking engagement with society. Within our own constituency, the inability to resolve conflicts in a distinctively Christ-like way is a painful reminder of the disjuncture between belief and behaviour. In contrast, historic Anabaptist ecclesiology included a profound commitment to a personal and relational life-long imitation of Jesus: to a modelling of the costly, counter-cultural and cruciform values of love, holiness, and peace-making. Theirs was a vision of a community

40 Here I strongly commend Graham Tomlin’s book, *The Provocative Church*. SPCK 2002

41 One example is that the traditional creedal marks of the church emphasised by the Reformed tradition. (one, holy, catholic and apostolic) tend to reflect an institutionalism, whereas their equally biblical flipside (*diversity* as well as unity, *charismatic* as well as holy, *local* as well as universal, *prophetic* as well as apostolic) speak more of a dynamic community. Cf. Howard Snyder, ‘The marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology’ in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, pp.77-103

under constant conversion.⁴²

Here, I suggest, are roots we desperately need to re-affirm in order to renew and refresh a missionary ecclesiology. One of our great contemporary challenges is not simply to see the church as a social *reality* but to see it as a new social *ethic*. As Hauerwas insists, ‘the church does not have a social ethic, the church *is* a social ethic’;⁴³ or, as John Howard Yoder argued, summarising so much of his thinking and passion, ‘The most important contribution which the church can make to a new social order is for itself to be a new social order’. In a bland, divided and violent world, people are longing for contrast communities where God’s multi-coloured, reconciling and peace-giving grace is being experienced.

- I think of a small struggling Baptist Church at Castlemilk, one of Glasgow’s deprived ‘schemes’. It is an area where many asylum seekers have, until recently, been placed. The church is deeply committed to showing hospitality, teaching English and providing practical help. This church has been thoroughly multi-cultural, and a winsome example in a tough, white, racist community.
- Bruce Milne spoke recently of a time when the Mayor of Vancouver came to their church. Bruce found himself asking his distinguished guest, ‘Can you think of any other body that meets anywhere in this city, for any purpose, on a weekly basis which has as great a diversity as our First Baptist, Vancouver, congregation?’
- In a recent interview, David Wilkerson talks of the *Times Square Church* he founded 15 years ago. He comments, ‘We have drug addicts sitting next to UN ambassadors and chief

42 See Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge UK, 2000

43 S. Hauerwas *The Peacable Kingdom* SCM, London 1991 p. 99

executives. There are 120 nationalities. It is the hottest show on Broadway. We have transvestites and every conceivable kind of person. I love it. I could never go back to an all white church and be comfortable'⁴⁴

'Fascination evangelism' is easy to name - but will only happen as we allow the Gospel to vastly increase our vision of what a redeemed humanity would look like.

Thirdly, I think it is clear that an over-emphasis on 'word and sacrament' in the reformed tradition has led to an over-emphasis on clericalism, and an under-emphasis on *truly congregational witness*. I am well aware that this has particularly affected Scottish Baptists life, with the unthinking osmosis, at times, of presbyterian ways, but I strongly suspect it has affected English Baptists too. The *crie de coeur* of the early German Baptist Oncken, was 'every member a missionary', and perhaps we need to think more realistically about what it actually means to equip each member of the congregation for effective witness and intentional discipleship. We can well be inspired by Anabaptist discipleship marked by its commitment to peace and justice, a willingness to follow Christ into suffering and a unquestioning commitment to live out the demands of the Great Commission. But we need to ask how it can be encouraged in our very different contexts.

- There is, in my opinion, an urgent need to challenge the prevailing cultural mind-set within most of our churches from 'a desire to be inspired' ('entertained' is too cheap an accusation) to a 'determination to be fruitful'. Simply passively listening to sermons or engaging in home-group discussions cannot model whole-life discipleship. One-to-one mentoring may help, as will more interactive and exercise-based discipleship programmes, but even these are often set in something of a mission vacuum. Part of a fuller vision would

44 *Life and Work* (Church of Scotland) October 2003 p.20

be of churches where *every member* is active in a ministry team, (many for the community beyond the church) according to gifting and where there is on-going training and support. Beyond that, there is need, perhaps, for traditional Sunday evenings and mid-week meetings to be turned into a 'night-class culture' where hands-on training in prayer, being a follower of Jesus at work, and community involvement-training is the norm.

Fourthly, allow me to raise one further ecclesiological issue from our 'gospel roots'. By an increasing emphasis (by the later Reformers and the Anabaptists) on discipline being an essential mark of the true church, Paul Avis argues that the focus was gradually taken off *the Christological centre* and on to 'defining the circumference'.⁴⁵ He sees this as an unfortunate development. What is undoubtedly the case is that one of the most pressing challenges for a missionary ecclesiology today is how the church can be, at *the same time*, both a distinct community (with a radical Christian praxis) and an inclusive one (with a Christological focus). It has to be acknowledged that one of the theological downsides of Baptist voluntarism (with its emphasis on *our* choosing to follow Christ, *our* associating together and *our* 'believing' together) is an underplaying of God's gracious call of whomever *He* chooses. We must never, ever lose sight of the fact that the church is the *creatura verbi*; that the Gospel is distinct from the church and gives rise to the church; that the ultimate dynamic among us is the magnetism of God's grace in Christ rather than any inherent moral attractiveness. Put another way, if it is true that what makes the church unique is its Spirit-empowered *orientation* to Jesus Christ and through him to the triune God, then what makes us distinct is the *direction* in which we are heading (and the *destination* to which we are ultimately travelling – Christ) rather than the moral details of our lives. This I

45 Paul Avis op. cit. Chapter 4 'Defining the Circumference' p.45-63 'The Anabaptists had made discipline the *sine qua non* of the Church; it loomed over every aspect of Christian life'. p.61

believe can be hugely liberating as we seek serious engagement with an increasingly messy world. Whenever we discern genuine movement towards Christ this is to be affirmed. The prodigal trudging home in his rags (rehearsing his opening apology) was, in Jesus eyes, far closer to the Father's heart than the clean, trim, elder brother (rehearsing his 'my rights' speech). A theo-dramatic emphasis is more concerned with tasting grace than defining its effects. As one Scottish Baptist Church likes to describe itself, it is 'committed at the core, open at the edges'.⁴⁶ Of course, such open-textured permeability to the church certainly has intensely practical implications for such issues as who and when we baptise and the meaning of membership.

B. The Triune God of Love – Church as Communion

We turn now to an approach to ecclesiology which, according to its proponents, offers significant potential for church renewal and ecumenical progress, namely *communion ecclesiology*.⁴⁷ This is possible, it is claimed, because it takes us back to a characteristically patristic vision of the church, thus pre-dating the major divisions of the church⁴⁸. Our focus here is again to investigate the potential of this ecclesiological starting point for re-energising the church's missionary calling.

Fundamentally this vision is to see church as essentially a communion, a *koinonia* among all God's people, born out of our shared participation in the life and love of the One-God-in-Three-

46 Stuart Blythe, Minister of Kirkintilloch Baptist Church. Somewhat in contrast to the 18th Century High Calvinists who described the church as 'an enclosed garden'!

47 See a good summary in Dennis M. Doyle *Communion Ecclesiology* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2000

48 Colin Gunton, 'The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community' p.51, in *On Being the Church*, doubts whether a theology of the Church, derived from the being of God as triune, ever was a strong feature of early church writing. Rather, the church in the East was to some extent shaped by a neo-platonic emphasis on a hierarchical structured world and in the West by political realities of an earthly empire.

Persons. Such participation in the communion of the triune God is our ultimate eschatological hope, but through faith in Christ is also our present privilege: 'truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.'⁴⁹ As we surrender ourselves to the triune God, and are baptised in the name of Father, Son and Spirit, we enter into the divine community and at once also into participation with all others in God. Such a vision of the church finds its primordial expression in the shared love of Jesus with his disciples, poignantly celebrated in the Last Supper⁵⁰ and celebrated by the church in the sacraments. This can hardly be a secondary dimension for a baptistic ecclesiology, for, as Miroslav Volf reminds us, 'If Christian initiation is a trinitarian event, then the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality'.⁵¹ Baptism is an important starting point because it reminds us that the Trinity is not just a speculative model, but is a logical deduction made from God's saving relationship with us; only the economy of salvation can lead us into a more immanent understanding of the divine.

Undoubtedly there is something deeply appealing about a perichoretic vision of the church where structures of subjugation are inadmissible, where all persons (male and female) are equal, and where freely constituted relationships form the very heart of ecclesial reality. In contemporary theology, such an ecclesiology is central to the Second Vatican Council's document on the church, *Lumen gentium*; it has been expounded by the Orthodox metropolitan John Zizioulas in his *Being as Communion*; and it has found a particular Free Church exponent in Miroslav Volf's *After our Likeness, The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. Everyone, or so it sometimes seems, is talking in enthusiastic tones of the church as an 'icon of the trinity' (though when Pete Ward starts talking about the 'liquid dance of God',⁵² I find it difficult to take him too seriously!).

Almost provoked by this, I want us to go back to our quest, and ask

49 1 John 1:3

50 Thus for Avery Dulles, in his *Models of the Church*, his preferred model is 'A Community of Disciples'.

51 Miroslav, Volf *After our Likeness* p.195

52 Pete Ward, Chapter 5, p. 49

again what is the effect of such an ecclesiological starting point for enlivening and liberating the church's missionary nature? Does such a vision energise and resource a missional stance or does it, in fact, distract and dampen a missionary dynamic? Have our delicate reflections in the seminar room on the inner life of God deflected us from a mission-energising vision of a God who in his trinitarian history has reached out in love to an alienated creation – or do they inform it? At first sight, the prospect does not seem too encouraging. Avery Dulles, in his astute comparative study of comparative ecclesiology, concludes, 'This type of ecclesiology (*communio* ecclesiology) fails to give Christians a very clear sense of their identity or mission. The motivation for Christian mission is left obscure'.⁵³ Within our own tradition, notions of the church being a reflection of a 'social trinity' can so easily pander to a gathered-church *ghetto* mentality. Paul Fiddes, who takes a positive view of communion ecclesiology, nevertheless warns that 'it is possible to think of the circle of God's inner triune life as a closed circle, a self-sufficient dance'.⁵⁴ Or again, David Bosch's evaluation of the 'Missionary paradigm of the Eastern Church' would, in part, suggest the same. Though he sees the Eastern church's emphasis on the love of God, their rich spirituality, and their intellectual apologetic vigour as positive for mission, he admits that in the early patristic and Byzantine period there was 'hardly any consciousness of the Spirit moving outwards to bring good news to a wider world. The church filled the entire horizon'.⁵⁵

Before we examine the missionary implications of this issue in more detail, however, two general hesitations are to be noted. First, there is an *epistemological concern* (a concern about the way knowledge is gained). The Scriptures reveal very little about the inner relations of the triune life of God, and all we do know flows from the

53 Avery Dulles. *Models* p.56

54 P.Fiddes. *Participating in God. A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000, p.78. Fiddes is here referring to the more Western version, where the three persons so co-inhere that they define the one substance.

55 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.201

record of the Father's reaching out to us in Christ and by his Spirit. Some ecclesial conclusions from the immanent trinity leave you breathless in their certainty! Given that the *communio* of the very being of God and the *communio* of God's people are clearly to be understood in an analogical fashion⁵⁶, great care needs to be taken as to the inferences drawn. Although there must be *some* correspondence for analogy to have any meaning at all, Miroslav Volf points out that the qualitative gulf between the perichoresis within the Trinity (perichoresis is the idea of mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the persons of the Godhead) and any human perichoresis must be fully acknowledged. Unlike the divine persons where mutual indwelling exists, as *human* subjects there can be no interior dwelling within each other. The church's unity, says Volf, 'is grounded in the interiority of the Spirit – and with the Spirit also in the interiority of the other divine persons – in Christians'.⁵⁷ In other words, what makes for a church community is the *koinonia* of the Spirit, not any 'human perichoresis'⁵⁸ and what makes for mission is Spirit-empowered witness, not 'continuing the processions of God'.⁵⁹ Without a carefully controlled use of analogy, there is a real danger of drawing out whatever ecclesiological and missiological conclusions we like. It is no surprise that very divergent ecclesiological conclusions claim the same starting point.⁶⁰

56 'Person' and 'communion' in the Godhead and in our creatureliness are hardly the same. Colin Gunton (op. cit. p. 75) puts it colourfully, 'the Church is what it is by virtue of being called to be a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is'.

57 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.213

58 But see Fiddes reply, *Participation*, that full participation is implied in John 17:21 p.48

59 Pace Myra Blyth. *Celebrating the Trinity*, Grove Spirituality Booklet 84, 2003. 'Our life in God is about continuing the processions of God by reaching out in love, offering community, healing and hope in the middle of fragmentation and exclusion'. p.27

60 So, for example, Roman Catholic ecclesiology, whilst claiming a trinitarian grounding, has so emphasised the one substance that it has promoted a monistic view that the church universal has priority, and the local church is a derivative

Second, related to this, it seems to me that there is a need *to talk of dependency* before talking of participation. That is to say, there is a requirement to keep in focus the sheer ontic gulf between the being of God and the being of the Church in order to emphasise that the church is entirely the result of God's gracious election, calling and gift. The church only has life by God's covenant in Christ, and it only has power by God's continual impartation of the Spirit. Thus, John Webster warns of 'the way in which accounts of the Church's relation to the triune life of God betray a drift into divine imminence. This can be seen in the way in which such ecclesiologies characteristically stress the continuity between the action of God and the action of the Church in a way that can easily jeopardise our sense of the freedom and perfection of God's work.'⁶¹ The net effect of not keeping such vigilance is that we can too quickly baptise all our ecclesial activity with divine blessing. All too easily, we can cosily assume that our way of being is 'going with the flow' of God's movement. But the Living God stands over his people as well as being among his people. A truly missionary church emerges out of the refining fire of God's judgement and is also caught up in the current of God's outgoing love. A missionary people are on their knees seeking after God, not just on their backs drifting with God!

However, having named these cautions, the reality is that the biblical witness is clear; namely, that *a real participation* in the life of God is fundamental to the Gospel – and to mission. The Spirit draws us into the Son who gives us access to the Father; and by so doing introduces us to the self-giving and out-going movements of love within the life of this triune God. The true nature of the Triune God, as an eternal self-giving community, was first shown in the generosity of creation, 'making space', as it were for others. It is now shown in the

of it. In contrast, eastern orthodoxy, with its emphasis on the priority of the persons (God constitutes himself through his trinitarian relationships: being *is* communion) concludes that the local congregations and universal church are in an equal and symmetrical relationship whilst also justifying a clerical hierarchy by emphasising monarchy of the Father.

61 John Webster, *Holiness* SCM Press, 2003 p.55

redeeming love of the Trinity, inviting humanity to both experience the generosity and participate in it for the sake of others. The profound words of Christ's high priestly prayer, 'as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be *in us*'⁶² are clearly in the context of mission.

The fundamental value of *communio* ecclesiology for releasing the church's missionary nature is perhaps obvious, but nevertheless vital to name. It is the focus it brings to *relationships*, relationships of love, mutuality, reciprocity, and equality. A vision of a God who is three-persons-in-community, and an appreciation of this God who made us in his image as humanity-in-relationship, are now well-worked themes but ones that should constantly grip us, inspire us and transform our way of being church. Here many things could be said.

- Perhaps an instructive starting point is to ask the question: 'What deductions about the nature of God would an un-churched stranger draw from dropping in to a typical Baptist church?' Would the words 'inclusive', 'hospitable', 'self-giving' and 'forgiving' be immediately part of the vocabulary? Until we truly learn to accept one another in the church, and not simply 'seek ourselves in the other'⁶³ we will struggle to even begin to mirror the divine hospitality.
- Or take another issue. Trend-tracers suggest that event-based evangelism is going to have a rapidly decreasing appeal in a fragmenting society where our primary community focus is not *where* we sleep but *how* we live.⁶⁴ Building open, honest and sustained relationships of trust within our natural daily networks is probably our single most important (and possibly most costly) calling as missionary communities. *Urban*

62 John 17:21

63 Jurgen Moltmann *The Open Church, Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle*, SCM, 1978 p.29

64 George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge*, Reading the Signs. Church Army, Sheffield Centre, p.12 See also No.22 Mission-shaped Church p.7

Expression, cautious about the hidden agenda of 'friendship evangelism', encourages us to ask, 'Do we love people because we want them to become Christians, or do we want people to become Christians because we love them?'

- For Baptists, a distinct part of our ecclesiology is our stress on inter-congregational support and encouragement. I am convinced that our mission is the weaker for our neglect of this theme. As someone involved in ministering to churches in crisis, I have often reflected that if only the local church had had the humility to invite the local leadership of a neighbouring church to offer advice, not only would some of the problems have been avoided, but also their witness in the neighbourhood would have been enhanced.

However, perhaps the most potent challenge is that communion ecclesiology casts a searching light *on our notions of power*, nourishing rather those all-too-rare missionary values of listening, dialogue, service, and partnership. We know that on a global scale, attitudes of superiority, imperialism and even coercion have dogged Christian mission for centuries. The plea of an indigenous Argentinean leader of the Qom people to Western missionaries speaks eloquently, 'We no longer want you to come and teach us the Bible. We want you to come and read the Bible together with us'.⁶⁵ Now is the time to learn that lesson here, and particularly in our own Baptist constituency.

- Stuart Murray has recently suggested that after a Decade of Evangelism' back in the '90s with mixed results, we should consider having a 'Decade of repentance' for the legacy of past centuries.⁶⁶ I fear that there is something about our Baptist way of being church that allows a 'power-holding ownership' rather

65 See David Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003 p.58

66 Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom*, Paternoster 2004, p.227

than a commitment to ‘empowering the stranger’.

- A happy exception, recorded in a *Baptist Times* article, is of the *Urban Expression* church plant in Shadwell, in the East End of London. Deeply significant was the simple fact that the name of the church, Cable Street Community Church, was chosen by the local residents, a name with particular resonance for the community, and a name the church planters would never have alighted on themselves. Juliet Kilpin, the pastor, comments, ‘We’ve come here and tried to listen to people. We’ve tried to understand the dynamics of the local community and let them shape the church.’⁶⁷

These words speak eloquently of a basic willingness to listen, fundamental to any serious attempt at contextualisation. Even more, we could add that true mission engagement involves a humility and openness to actually learn new dimensions of God’s ways, allowing the Gospel to be understood even more fully (famously, Peter’s ‘conversion’ through Cornelius) and the church to take on fresh shape (eg. Antioch.).⁶⁸ George Lings, the Church Army church planter observes, ‘The weaker church is freer to work contextually, to try out various new options, to abandon what does not deliver, and so to discover what works in practice.’⁶⁹ So here, I believe, is a crucial issue for the future of mission. Mission does not flow out of power, strength and domination but out of honesty and solidarity with a hurting world. In a society filled with anxiety and pain it is often our vulnerability that speaks more than our certainties. (Was this not precisely why Jesus sent out the Twelve without money, bag, extra tunic or staff?⁷⁰) Among many where alienation and self-doubt is deeply felt, it is sometimes our very marginalised status that can earn a hearing. It was as Jesus

67 *Baptist Times*, November 20th 2003 p. 5

68 Acts 10 and 11. I believe our inability to associate together as churches for the sake of mission is also often due to a lack of corporate humility.

69 George Lings *Encounters*. p.9

70 Matthew 10:9

showed his disciples his scars that he breathed on them and commissioned them.⁷¹

- I think of the church at Portrack, an Urban Priority Area estate near Stockton-on-Tees, in the days when Roy Searle was pastor. Following a debilitating arson attack on the building, the church members, to their surprise, found the locals showing uncanny indignation that '*their* church' had been so scarred. (Many knew what it felt like to be attacked and abused.) A number came on board to help with the re-building and were drawn into the faith-life of the church.

An emphasis on *communio* must also be welcomed as a significant antidote to contemporary evangelism, high as it often is on 'what-method-next-pragmatics' and *low on spirituality*, prompting John Drane's acerbic observation, 'We are in danger of ending up with a secular church in a spiritual world'.⁷² To taste something of the depth of God's love in human community, as expressed in the words of Jesus, 'May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me'⁷³ is surely one of our greatest challenges. Equally, there is a breadth to God's love we rarely catch. It has been argued that a Trinitarian starting point has significantly widened our understanding of mission,

71 John 20:20-21

72 John Drane comments that a fundamental need is 'a rediscovery of community as a central part of Christian faith and practice, and a realignment of the relationship between theology and spirituality. This will be a huge challenge to the *status quo*, for it will require us to put into reverse gear the way most of our churches operate' in *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith*, Paternoster Press, 2000 p.120

73 John 17:23

fuelling a passion for liberation,⁷⁴ for ecology,⁷⁵ and partnership⁷⁶ as constituent aspects of holistic mission.

All this adds up to a tentative conclusion that the significant contribution of communion ecclesiology is perhaps not only an *energising of mission*, but a *shaping for mission*.⁷⁷ This would certainly accord with a Johannine account of mission, where on the one hand there is an unmistakable theme of the Father *sending* the Son,⁷⁸ but on the other hand the equally strong theme of the *mutual love* and indwelling of Father and Son.⁷⁹

C. The God who Reigns – Church as a Community of the Kingdom

The third approach to ecclesiology, which I want to explore, takes as its starting point the undisputed focus of all Jesus' ministry, namely his *inauguration of the Kingdom of God*.⁸⁰ The Synoptic Gospels, in particular, make it clear that the distinctive message of Jesus is that in his own coming the Kingdom of God had drawn near. By the first century, Jews commonly saw God as their King, the all-powerful ruler who had chosen Israel and would intervene on their behalf. The whole Hebrew heritage pointed to the promise that God will one day reign; a definitive, future act of God where the world as it is presently known

74 For example, the advocacy of Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. P. Burns, London, Burns and Oates, 1988

75 Jurgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, London, SCM 1991, 'a perichoretic understanding of the relationship of God to creation sees God creating, forming, sustaining, enduring, receiving, accompanying, moving and suffering as an expression of the liveliness of his love'. p.131

76 J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations*, p.187

77 Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, New York, Harper Collins, 1991 The doctrine of the Trinity cannot be used directly to construct an ecclesiology, but rather offers 'the critical principle against which we can measure present institutional arrangements'. p.402-403

78 John 3:17; 4:34; 5:23; 6:44; 7:18; 8:29; 10:42; 12:44; 13:16; 14:24; 15:21; 17:8.

79 John 14: 9-10; 15:12; 17:10,21,22.

80 For an overview of this broad approach to ecclesiology (from a Catholic perspective) see John Fuellenbach, *Church – Community for the Kingdom*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2002

will come to an end. Thus, when Jesus came announcing 'the Kingdom of God is near' it clearly was understood in Jewish ears as something both dynamic and irreducibly eschatological.

'Kingdom ecclesiology' argues quite simply that if Jesus Christ is the inaugurator and Head of the church, and if his Kingdom is his primary concern, then Kingdom values and perspectives must decisively determine the theological contours of ecclesiology. Rather than taking the infamously cynical line of Alfred Loisy 'Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and what came was the church'⁸¹, this approach sees a legitimate and fundamental relationship between the two.

This relationship however must be clearly defined. On the one hand the message of Jesus prohibits an over-identification of church and Kingdom. The New Testament never simply equates believers with the Kingdom. The church arises from the preaching of the reign of God and waits for its final realisation, but the church is most definitely not the Kingdom. The sovereign reign of God is never to be articulated as dependent on *our* ecclesial activity. On the other hand, however, we are not to see a total discontinuity between the provisional status of the historical *ecclesia* and the ultimate reality of the *basileia*. The very concept of the Kingdom of God implies a community, a gathering of people who own God as King.⁸² The calling of *twelve* disciples is the founding of such a community, a reconstituted Israel. Karl Rahner talks of 'the final elimination of the church'⁸³; but the New Testament witness is rather that the church, far from passing away at the end of time, will actually come into its own as a central feature of the glory of God's final reign. There is a strong sense in the Gospels, for example,

81 A.Loisy *The Gospel and the Church*, 1908 p.166

82 I.H.Marshall Article 'Church' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, I.V.P. 1992, p.123

83 Karl Rahner 'The Church and the Parousia of Christ' *Theological Investigations Vol. 6*. Baltimore, Helicon 1969, p.298. The church 'is living always on the proclamation of her own provisional status and of her historically advancing elimination in the coming Kingdom of God towards which she is expectantly travelling as a pilgrim'.

that the communal life of Jesus' disciples will find its full meaning at 'the renewal of all things' when the disciples will 'sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel'⁸⁴. Thus, the church is a witness to the Kingdom, a herald and instrument of the Kingdom, and an anticipatory sign of it, but is not itself the Kingdom.

The theologian of our time who perhaps most clearly articulates a kingdom ecclesiology is Jurgen Moltmann. In his *Church in the Power of the Spirit* he describes his ecclesiology as 'messianic', a 'christologically founded and eschatologically directed doctrine of the church'⁸⁵ where the church is seen in the service of the universal future of God's Kingdom. The church is characteristically 'an exodus church', always on the move towards God's future. This orientation relativises all human constructs, not only freeing the church from the world around but also from subjection to itself. It is a 'messianic fellowship', a community of those who, through union with Christ and by the Spirit, participate in Christ's mission orientated towards the coming Kingdom of God. It is an anticipation of that kingdom, 'the first free people of the new creation'. What defines the church for Moltmann, therefore, is not so much certain markers it possesses, but the very *movement* of the mission of Christ and the Spirit⁸⁶. The effect is 'to point away from the pastoral church that looks after the people, to the people's own communal church among the people'⁸⁷. A kingdom ecclesiology is, for Moltmann, an inescapably missionary ecclesiology.

This vision of the church must be understood in the context of Moltmann's over-arching theological programme. His concern is to portray God's self revelation, not as an unveiling of 'timeless truth' but as revelation marked by promise and future, 'the trinitarian history of God'. On the one hand, given that divine action always corresponds with divine being, he argues that the mission of the economic trinity reflects a generation and procession within the very inner being of

84 Matthew 19:28

85 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p.13

86 Moltmann *The Church*, p. 65, 122

87 *Ibid* xvi

God. On the other hand, however, he sees that the experience of history is real for God (an essential feature of being a God of love). Thus God himself moves towards an eschatological goal where all creation will be gathered to him in love and God will be 'all in all'⁸⁸. It is only in this future-orientated narrative of the Trinity that Moltmann understands the church. The church is thus constituted by the missions of the Son and Spirit from the Father on their way to the eschatological kingdom. It is a pilgrim people, bearing faithful witness to God's rule, an expression of the Spirit of the *eschaton* within history, and a community longing for its full consummation. 'The church's final word', says Moltmann, 'is not 'church', but the glory of the Father, and the Son and the Spirit of liberty'.⁸⁹ There are aspects to Moltmann's ecclesiology that we may find problematic⁹⁰, but his central emphasis that the church is to be understood fundamentally as *a movement*, living in the power of the Spirit between the history of Jesus and his final return, is singularly important.

This whole emphasis on the essential eschatological character of the church is faithful to the New Testament witness. There is clearly an 'already-not yet' eschatological tension in the way the New Testament views the church. By virtue of believers being united with the risen and exalted Christ, the two ages of classic Jewish apocalypticism have overlapped, and thus Paul, for example, can describe the Corinthian church members as 'those upon whom the end of the ages has come'⁹¹.

88 Ibid p.57

89 Ibid p.19

90 For me, this includes Moltmann's commitment that alongside the church are equal 'partners in history who are not the church and will never become the church'. These include Israel and other world religions. To justify this, Moltmann seems to move away from a Christological locus to a pneumatological one. See R. Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making* Marshall Pickering 1987 p.138. Further, Moltmann argues, but in a rather unclear way, from the principle *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* that as Christ is among the poor, (Matthew 25:31-46) so wherever the poor are found there is the church. M.R Tripole, 'Ecclesiological developments in Moltmann's Theology of Hope' *Theological Studies* 34, 1973, p.32

91 1 Corinthians 10:11

In Colossians, God's people are, on the one hand, already enjoying their inheritance (Col.1:12) and yet on the other are still awaiting it (Col.3 :24). Because God's people, in the New Testament, are 'in Christ' who 'is seated at the right hand of God' the church is to be viewed as a heavenly reality⁹²; and precisely because the Spirit is the pledge and foretaste of that reality, the church is an anticipatory sign.⁹³ Further, it is to be noted that whenever *ecclesia* is used in the New Testament with wider reference than simply a local congregation or house church (e.g. Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22) it is better to interpret it, not as it is routinely done, as a reference to the church universal but rather as an allusion to the heavenly gathering around Christ⁹⁴. Note that on this basis, the classic difference of opinion between different ecclesiologies as to whether the local or universal church should be our starting point would seem to miss the point. Rather, each local church is to be conceived as an anticipation of the final glorious unity before the throne of the Lamb and the church universal to be conceived as a fuller, but still partial anticipation of God's ultimate purpose⁹⁵.

What is important for our purposes is again to assess the

92 Andrew Lincoln in his *Paradise Now and Not Yet, Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to his Eschatology*, C.U.P. 1981, argues that in Pauline eschatology there is a strong emphasis not so much on temporal eschatological categories but on a spacial one where 'the eschatological centre of gravity has moved to the heavenly realm'. Heaven is not 'some static eternal state, but rather part of the forward moving history of salvation'. p.172

93 Douglas Farrow, *The Ascension and Ecclesi. On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1999, points out that at the heart of the church is an essential ambiguity, that of Christ being bodily absent (*Christus absens*) and yet spiritually present by his Spirit (*Christus praesens*). By not recognising this 'ascension/parousia differential' Farrow maintains we will never give proper weight to the role of the Spirit in the church.

94 Peter T. O'Brien 'The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity' in *The Church in the Bible and the World*. Ed. Don Carson. Baker house Book House. Grand Rapids, Michigan 1987

95 Miroslav Volf *After Our Likeness*. p.139

missiological impact of this third major approach to ecclesiology. Clearly for Moltmann, a Kingdom perspective - the church pointing humanity to the Kingdom and mediating the life of the Kingdom - is seen as indispensable for nurturing a missionary ecclesiology. Fundamental to this is to see the church as an *anticipatory sign of the Kingdom*, a missionary sign alerting the world to a transcendence in the midst of history; the church as the vanguard of a new humanity⁹⁶. As such the church is a pilgrim people, an 'arrow-like community'⁹⁷ pointing people and inviting all humanity to a journey of unique significance. This theme echoes Newbigin's famous words:

The church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening on to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the ends of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one.⁹⁸

This anticipatory community is to be understood by Moltmann in two distinct ways. First, the church anticipates the future Kingdom by representing the universal concern of the Kingdom and therefore offering itself in self-giving service to the whole world. The church is the *messianic fellowship of service* and is true to its nature as the body of the crucified as well as risen Lord only when it gives itself sacrificially to the world.⁹⁹ This involves not only the proclamation of the Gospel but all which, in Christ's name, leads to economic, political, ecological, or personal liberation¹⁰⁰. Some forms of evangelical eschatology lead to a fixation on the parousia that denies all present mission responsibilities, but for Moltmann this is anything but the case; rather, 'the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh

96 Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit* p.196

97 Moltmann *Theology of Hope* p. 328

98 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*, Paternoster Press reprint of 1953 SCM edition p.22

99 Moltmann *Theology of Hope* p. 327

100 Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit* p. 223

of every unfulfilled present'¹⁰¹. Such holistic mission will be costly service. Participation in the mission of Christ involves sharing in his sufferings as well as knowing the power of the resurrection, and therefore standing alongside the poor and oppressed. Second, however, the church is anticipatory by already being a *community of hope*, anticipatory by being *participatory*. The church now is privileged to enjoy, through the eschatological Spirit, a foretaste of the life and glory to come. As such, it is meant to be an 'experimental garden of the new humanity'¹⁰², dramatically standing out in the drab landscape of an alienated world. This theme of the church as a 'contrast community' we have already explored. A balance must thus be maintained between these two dimensions of mission, the church being concerned for both *involvement* and *identity*; having a world-embracing ethical thrust married to grace-centred, soteriological depth.¹⁰³ These can only be held together by a robust doctrine of the Spirit, the One who is both the primary and essential missionary, thrusting us out into the world, and the one who is the earnest of the Age to Come, giving us our present unique self-understanding.

I am persuaded that only such a robust Kingdom perspective can adequately shake off the ecclesial shackles of ethical lethargy, protective club-mentality and cultural irrelevance that still binds far too much of our contemporary baptist church life. Let me simply touch on three areas.

First, a Kingdom perspective *relativises all present (and past) ecclesial patterns and structures*; it emphasises their provisionality, and so frees us up for radical experimentation into new ways of being and doing church. It views the True church as that which is still to come and therefore emphasises that the God's People are, essentially, a pilgrim people, a community *on the move*.¹⁰⁴ The church is not only

101 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, SCM, London 1967 p. 21

102 H. Berkhof *Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1979 p. 415

103 See a full discussion in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 381-389

104 It becomes almost *the* consular model of the church in post- Vatican II Catholic theology. *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity). p.9 See Bosch op.cit p.373

a gathered people but a *gathering movement*.¹⁰⁵

- Peter Neilson, main author of the Church of Scotland report, *Church without Walls*, has, with an attractive simplicity, defined the church as ‘those people who have Jesus at the centre, travelling wherever Jesus takes them’. As Neilson argues in the report, ‘The eschatological perspective challenges our obsession with buildings and money, releases us from our “structural fundamentalism” to sit lightly to inherited structures. It frees us from anxiety about our changing place in society’.¹⁰⁶
- One image, which perhaps captures this, is of a small band of camera-clicking tourists at a national heritage site. They have faithfully waited by the ‘*Tour begins in 20 minutes*’ sign and are now being led by the official guide, with internationals listening into headsets. But the original party of ten is soon doubled and trebled as previously individual tourists are drawn in. Some, who never waited at all, are right in there with the crowd and soon on the front row! Here is a gathered community on the move, gathering as they go. At the centre is a Guide, whose presence is the only reason for the gathering and whose authority and story makes sense of everything around.¹⁰⁷

105 G. Vandervelde, ‘The Challenge of Evangelical Ecclesiology’ in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol.27 No1. January 2003 p.13

106 The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Proposed Deliverance, *A church without walls*, 36/10.

107 Having written this, I came across a remarkably similar image in Newbigin, ‘*On being the Church for the World*’, ‘For my first twelve years as a Bishop I was normally conducting worship in the open street. My picture of the church in those days is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground, and a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around and listening, watching and discussing. Thank God, when I came back a few months later some of those would be in the group in the front.’ quoted by David F. Wright ‘What Kind of Theology’, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 1999 p.107

Second, we desperately need to see ourselves as ‘kingdom people’ before ‘church people’ in order *to engage much more creatively and intentionally in our society*. Howard Snyder characterises it like this:

Kingdom people seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world.¹⁰⁸

One criticism often levelled at an ‘alternative-community-view’ of the church, is that it does not offer a clear enough incentive for prophetic Christian engagement in society at large. This is valid, and is precisely why a Kingdom ecclesiology is so vital a corrective. There is a profound disconnectedness that still exists between what is preached, prayed and sung about in public worship services and what happens for the rest of a typical week. What is an absolutely central starting point is the conviction that the primary ministry for most church members will be in their place of work. This will be reflected in significant, dedicated time being given to pray for, and think through, issues in the workplace.

- I well remember as pastor at Morningside, Edinburgh, organising a church lunch after which the whole congregation was invited to spend unhurried time in ‘work-related’ groups. Members met in different parts of the building to tell stories, identify issues and pray as lawyers, teachers, homemakers, civil servants, those in heavy industry, business, health care, and the voluntary sector. Folk afterwards talked of it being one of the most rewarding and resourcing times they could remember.

108 Howard Snyder. *Liberating the Church*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 1983, p.11

Thirdly, we have a great deal of reflection to do as to the *provocative quality of our worship, and our communal life together*. For all our wariness of the pastorally damaging 'over-realised' eschatology of some neo-pentecostalism, do we not have to admit that a great need in most of our churches is for a demonstration of the gospel that comes not simply with words, but also 'with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction'¹⁰⁹. Only when the windows of the church are open to the Kingdom will we experience something of the fresh air of the life to come.

Conclusion

True theological reflection, said T.F. Torrance, is 'the repentant re-thinking of all tradition face to face with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ'¹¹⁰. Such repentant re-thinking is what I have at least attempted here. Little of what I have outlined is new; but by pulling it together in this way, my hope is that it may have had a somewhat cumulative impact. The evidence on the ground is that, with happy exceptions, we are not the missionary people we sometimes claim to be. It has prompted a question I have judged to be too infrequently asked; namely, 'Are there things about the very way, as Baptists, we conceive 'church' that inhibits mission?' My conclusion is that there are indeed key factors that can be identified which, if addressed, can re-energise and liberate the church for mission. I have sought to argue that it is the paucity of our reflection on God's design for the church that is stopping the sinking ship self-righting.

First, I am convinced that we need, as Baptists, to articulate and live out a more *dynamic and God-centred ecclesiology*. There is an urgent need to re-imagine and re-experience the church as that community both created *by* and *for* the mission of God. The church is that community where God has chosen to dwell intimately, through Christ and by his Spirit. For all the usefulness of our Baptist covenant

109 1 Thessalonians 1:5

110 T.F. Torrance *Theology in Reconstruction*, London, 1965 p.164

language and our voluntarist emphasis, it is only through a vision of our life *together in Jesus* that our rampant individualism can be countered. There is something deeply ironic that our very congregationalism can foster a destructive individualism unless it is firmly rooted in our mutual commitment and submission in Christ.

Second, there is a plea here for a re-focusing on ***the church as Gospel people***, with an emphasis on both ‘Gospel’ and ‘people’. The Gospel is not simply a story to be told and believed, but one that has to be lived, embodied and allowed to have its continuing converting effect on our lives. Such continuous conversion happens ‘as the congregation hears, responds to and obeys the gospel of Jesus Christ in ever new and more comprehensive ways.’¹¹¹ And this only happens in the context of true, visible *community*. Too infrequently have we insisted that the fruit of God’s grace is the formation of attractive, provocative and welcoming communities. As Baptist people we need to take a long, hard and honest look at ourselves and confess how resistant we often are to our ongoing transformation. It will require us to ask what ‘outsiders’ actually make of us. It is most certainly not about working harder to be more distinct, but rather about finding in Christ’s grace a beauty that draws us, and, through the Spirit, creating an environment that makes it easy for others to be drawn too.

Finally, mission-shaped church is about allowing our lives, in all their fallen frailty and sinful insularity, to be caught up in the ***outgoing love of the Triune God and the outward and onward orientation of God’s Kingdom***. It will require that costly willingness to allow Kingdom values to challenge and shape present practice. This will include sacrificing cherished practices that do not display a joyful bias to the un-churched and the marginalised; finding communal patterns for resourcing each other for whole-life discipleship, and taking risks of faith to serve our society in Christ’s name.

111 D.L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000 p.150.



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