

## Moltmann on the Congregation

**I**N HIS recent article "The Relevance and Vitality of the Sect-Idea",<sup>1</sup> J. G. G. Norman has pointed out that in recent years there has been "a revival of respect for the sect-ideal". The historical importance of the sects as catalysts of social change and as preservatives of vital religious community life is being more fully recognised. Further, with the erosion of the position of the State Churches and indeed of the larger institutional denominations in western society today, many are asking whether the sect-type of Church may not be entering upon a new era of its own. Baptists, among others, should naturally be sensitive to such developments.

As a further indication of this new interest, it is highly significant that one of the most distinguished of contemporary continental theologians has added his weight to the call for a redirection of Church life towards the "sectarian"—or at least definitely congregational—pattern of community. Jürgen Moltmann of Tübingen has for over a decade been reinvigorating theology with a renewed emphasis on the category of *hope*, as fundamental for the Christian style. In his first major work *Theology of Hope*,<sup>2</sup> he affirmed the resurrection of Jesus as the foundation of Christian faith and mission. The appearances of the risen Jesus are vocational visions, beckoning the disciples towards the horizon of God's future of life and righteousness, inciting on the one hand hope, and on the other hand criticism of present existence. The Church is called to live towards this future and to express its hope in the present through the transformation of society. It is not for the Church to accept the roles which society expects it to fulfil within the prescribed "religious" or "clerical" areas of life, but, in obedience to its calling in the risen Christ, to be an "exodus Church", "in practical opposition to things as they are, and in creative reshaping of them."<sup>3</sup>

In his second major work *The Crucified God*,<sup>4</sup> Moltmann, still keeping the resurrection in view, adjusts the focus from Easter to Good Friday. It is the *crucified* Jesus who is raised from the dead, the one who died in abandonment and godforsakenness. Thereby, God indicates that suffering is part of his own trinitarian life, and that he chooses solidarity with the oppressed, the forsaken and the godless. Again, radical political and social implications are drawn from this theology of the cross. "If this crucified man has been raised from the dead and exalted to be the Christ of God, then what public opinion holds to be lowliest, what the state has determined to be disgraceful, is changed into what is supreme". God's glory shines not on the crowns

of the mighty, but on the face of the crucified, not on the powerful and rich, but on the outcast Son of Man".<sup>5</sup> "The political theology of the cross must liberate the state from the political service of idols and must liberate men from political alienation and loss of rights. It must seek to demythologise state and society. It must prepare for the revolution of all values which is involved in the exaltation of the crucified Christ, in the demolition of relationships of political domination".<sup>6</sup>

From Easter to Good Friday to . . . a revolutionary political take-over of theology? No. Moltmann has moved forward again, to Pentecost. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*<sup>7</sup> is his third main contribution to date. It has still more recently been joined by a slighter but no less valuable collection of essays, *The Open Church*,<sup>8</sup> which should be read by anyone who is inclined to dismiss Moltmann's socio-political radicalism as yet another academic's toying with trendy ideas. Moltmann has himself known what it is to be defeated and dispossessed, cold and hungry, behind barbed wire; and it was, incidentally, while a prisoner of war in England that he came to Christian faith. His reflections on that phase of his life have played a real part in his theological formation.

In these two works Moltmann expounds an entirely positive theology of the Church as the People of God. Not that this represents any conservatism or narrowing of horizons after his previous works, which form an essential basis for his ecclesiology. He makes clear his radical edge at the start, with his intention "to point away from the pastoral church, that looks after the people, to the people's own communal church among the people".<sup>9</sup> And his view of the church stems from the theology of the two previous books, with its unequivocal affirmation that God not only acts in history, but has a history himself. *The Crucified God* contains a remarkable (some would say unduly speculative) treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of the *history* and *experience* of God as suffering. The cross is an event between Jesus and his Father in the Spirit. Not only does the Son suffer on account of his being delivered up and abandoned. The Father also suffers the grief of the loss of the Son. Moltmann continues:

"Because this death took place in the history between Father and Son on the cross on Golgotha, there proceeds from it the spirit of life, love and election to salvation. The concrete 'history of God' in the death of Jesus on the cross on Golgotha therefore contains within itself all the depths and abysses of human history and therefore can be understood as the history of history. All human history, however much it may be determined by guilt and death, is taken up into this 'history of God', i.e. into the Trinity and integrated into the future of the 'history of God'. There is no suffering which in this history of God is not God's suffering; no death which has not been God's death in the history of Golgotha. Therefore there is no life, no fortune and no joy which have not

been integrated by his history into eternal life, the eternal joy of God. To think of 'God in history' always leads to theism and atheism. To think of 'history in God' leads beyond that, into new creation and theopoiesis."<sup>10</sup>

From the heights of this neo-Hegelian speculation, it seems a long way down to the chapel in the valley. But we are on the way, and what Moltmann is determined to do is to locate the starting point of ecclesiology within the doctrine of God himself; not a static God of frozen metaphysical absolutes, aloof from the confusions of human history, but the God who embraces our history within his own grief of crucifixion, and who presses on to include us in the final joy of salvation, of which Easter is the anticipation. In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* Moltmann expounds the "history of God" from the perspective of the work of the third person of the Trinity, and the relation of his sending to the sending of the Son. Through the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit the superabundance of the divine life wills to communicate itself to men. The Spirit both reveals the meaning of the history of Christ through faith and brings about the new creation which is the goal of the messianic mission of Christ. The church can only be understood *within* the history of God: "It finds itself on the path traced by this history of God's dealings with the world, and it discovers itself as one element in the movements of the divine sending, gathering together and experience. 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 that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way"<sup>11</sup>

The church participates in Christ's messianic mission and the creative mission of the Spirit. *What* the church is can never always be fully defined, but we can tell *where* the church happens. "The church participates in the glorifying of God in creation's liberation. Wherever this takes place through the workings of the Spirit, there is the church. The true church is the song of thanksgiving of those who have been liberated"<sup>12</sup>

The church, then, takes its shape from the liberating work of the Spirit and the gospel of Jesus' coming kingdom. This gospel is directed to "the poor"; it is a partisan gospel for the oppressed. The rich will only be helped by it when they realise their own real poverty and enter into solidarity with the poor. The church itself, therefore, to be true to the messianic mission of Jesus, must be the poor and dispossessed of the beatitudes. The aristocratic attitude of wanting to be a church *for* the people is denied it. The church is essentially the fellowship of the godless who have found fellowship with God through Jesus, abandoned by God on the cross. Jesus is their representative and if his ministry on the cross is "priestly" (Epistle to the Hebrews), its consequence is the priesthood of all believers, called to be ambassadors of reconciliation in the world in Christ's stead. In a crucial passage Moltmann continues:

"The priestly ministry of the representative can only spring from *sym-pathy*, from 'suffering-with' (cf. also Heb. 4. 5). The fellow-

ship called into life by Christ's self-surrender serves to reconcile the world through solidarity with the suffering of the people and through participation in the representative work of Christ in the Spirit. The Christian 'being-there-for-others' cannot be detached from 'being-with-others' in solidarity; and 'being-with-others' cannot be separated from 'being-for-others'. Consequently there can really be no fundamental division between the general priesthood of all believers and the particular priestly ministry. The whole church lives from Christ's self-giving and in self-giving for the reconciliation of the world. Fundamentally all Christians participate in Christ's priestly ministry and are witnesses of his intercession and sacrifice in the lives they live."<sup>13</sup>

We shall have occasion to ask later whether in fact Moltmann himself is entirely consistent in following through, on a practical level, this inseparability of "being-with" and "being-for". But if we are beginning to suspect that he is moving towards what we think of as a "congregational" pattern of the church (albeit in solidarity with the world), this is more than amply confirmed. The fellowship which truly corresponds to the gospel is the "messianic community" which, by continually telling its own story with the story of Christ, is liberated from the myths of the society in which it lives, and liberates men and women from the attitudes of contemporary society. The messianic community belongs to the Messiah, and his word, realising the possibilities of the messianic era.

Moltmann follows through the logic of this thrust to a rejection of the concept of a state church—not simply on account of the essential link between such a church and the *status quo*, but also because of the nature of the church and its consequent relationships with the people. It becomes a church of clerical authority, in which fellowship *in* the church is replaced by fellowship *with* the church; a church which basically provides clerical ministrations and pastoral care *for* the people. Against this tendency there has always been a stream of reforming or prophetic sects, at the time of the Reformation no less than in the Constantinian era.

Does the Reformation in fact have a future? Yes, says Moltmann—and it lies with those who truly sought to realise "the congregation". The enthusiasts, Baptists and sectarians were rejected by the mainstream Reformation, but:

"Today we see ever more clearly that they remained true to the claim of the Reformation; justification through faith grounds the right to congregation. Luther's treatise, 'That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint and Dismiss Teachers' was the beginning for the free-church movement in Protestantism. Whatever forms the free churches in England, America, and then, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, also in Germany have developed (and there are of course dangers, mistakes, and wrong

developments enough here too), the future of the church of Christ lies in principle on this wing of the Reformation because the widely unknown and uninhabited land of the congregation is found here."<sup>14</sup>

Moltmann points out how there are signs that in fact the Catholic dioceses and Protestant national denominations are moving towards a rediscovery of the congregation, and that in many places "grass roots" congregations are arising. Hope is springing up for the church from the bottom. The character of the congregation, says Moltmann, will be "charismatic". The Spirit builds up the community through the diversity of gifts, by no means confined to those with "special" ministries. This means the end of a hierarchical church of "religion" which "looks after" people, but instead a community of diverse roles, which is the subject of its own history.

Along with this affirmation of the gathered, messianic and "charismatic" community, Moltmann rejects the practice of infant baptism which he sees as an essential element in the state church ethos. It does not do justice to the significance of baptism as the call to the freedom of the messianic era. The order of the New Testament churches is first faith, then baptism. So it is with infant baptism—with the faith of parents, godparents and church. Parental faith does indeed have a real place in messianic responsibility towards the children. But children are not simply an extension of their parents, able to be automatically integrated into their parents' baptism. "The natural link between the generations has relevance for the proclamation of the gospel and for the ministry of liberation in the sequence of time. But it cannot compel the sequel of baptism and does not justify the baptism of infants".<sup>15</sup> Nor is the argument for infant baptism as a sign of prevenient grace adequate. The "passivity" by which grace is received is a *creative* receptivity, and only metaphorically embodied in the helplessness of the infant. Baptism goes with faith—and while faith commits us to representative service, it cannot be representative for the *faith* (even temporarily) of another. As if to quell the nervousness of good Lutherans who fear for the strength of the church if infant baptism goes, Moltmann points to the "flourishing" life of churches, especially in the United States, which do practise believers' baptism.<sup>16</sup>

It would be an unworthy response to Moltmann if those who attach themselves to Baptist practice merely greeted his thinking with an appreciative nod, grateful for yet another piece of artillery firing in the same direction. As this paper has tried to make clear, his ecclesiology stems from his theology as a whole, and it can be grasped in its full significance only if we are equally prepared to expose ourselves to the far-reaching significance of his exposition of the history of God, and the radical implications he sees in the gospel for the totality of our social and political context. His vision of the congregation as the people who are liberated in the Spirit to be the subject of their own history, the messianic community of those truly open to each other and in solidarity with the "poor"—all this is as much a challenge to the

general pattern of our conventional "gathered church" life as it is to the more obviously institutionalised "established" or "catholic" churches. Few of us today should need to be reminded how far our churches are mainly middle-class, and in their own way minister-centred, not to mention male-dominated. Baptists have perhaps tended too much to justify their pattern of church life (as have other denominations) in terms of their faithfulness to *tradition*, more specifically a particular reading of the New Testament tradition. That is allowable, provided that the backward look is equally matched by the forward gaze to the coming of the kingdom, of which the gift of the Spirit is the first fruits, and the life of the congregation an anticipation. What dare we expect our life of worship, fellowship and service to be, if we really believe it to be taken up into the history of the Spirit, pressing towards the fullness of the new humanity? What should the world expect to find in the community of believers, the messianic community, if it really is a foretaste of the new creation? We speak readily of *faith* and *order*. At times here one catches nuances of the current concern for "law and order", which, it has been pointed out, might well from a Christian perspective be less nervously expressed as law and *justice*. But should we not equally be concerned with *hope* and *celebration*? Exposure to Moltmann's stress on the gospel's bias towards the dispossessed, and the embodiment of this in congregational life, will also serve to remind us sharply that whereas Baptists have the reputation (and often appear to enjoy it) of being among the most a-political of Christian traditions, there *are* far-reaching social implications in what we believe about discipleship and Christian community. Our history, in this country and elsewhere, in the distant past and more recently, provides enough examples of this being brought out onto the surface, in action and suffering, to make this clear.

But a serious dialogue does not consist only of listening. There are questions to put to Moltmann in turn. He asks, "Is there a way that the church *of* the people can develop out of the church *for* the people?"<sup>17</sup> It is not clear that he provides any immediately useful answers to this question. Or rather, the terms in which he asks it make it difficult to see how such a development can take place. He points out that in recent years there has been an emphasis on "the church for the world", with much emphasis on specialised ministries and mission. He takes urban industrial mission as an example. He sees such programmes as still dominated by a conception of the church *for* the people. "The programmes of the missionary liberation of the people speak too little of the people themselves".<sup>18</sup> The people themselves remain largely outside them. A true church *of* the people will be free from the mission of "the rich, the educated, the activists, and the ideologists" in order to experience its own freedom in the kingdom of God. Moltmann confesses himself unable to provide answers as to how this can take place, beyond stressing the need for participation by people in working out their own liberation. The Christian community discovers Jesus *in* the people. "Before this community initiates pro-

grammes and concludes historical alliances with other groups, it eats and drinks with the people and breaks the bread of poverty in the common hope. And when the persons of this community sit together in a circle and eat a common meal they can express their concrete needs and discuss the possibilities of common action and the strategies of self-liberation".<sup>19</sup> This is the messianic style of mission.

This is indeed a creative vision of what mission can be. But in the end Moltmann speaks about "the people" in such a repeatedly undefined way, that one suspects a certain romanticism to be at work here, perhaps even a sentimentalism, with its own inherent and hidden paternalism towards the underprivileged. Daniel Jenkins, in his thoughtful little book *Christian Maturity and the Theology of Success*,<sup>20</sup> also finds Moltmann guilty of a degree of romanticism at a slightly different point, namely, in his apparent failure to emphasize that the gospel not only includes political and social liberation, but has much to say about the way in which the liberated behave after victory and how they in turn enjoy power. "It might have been expected that a German theologian, with the experience of the last sixty years in Europe behind him, would need no reminder that revolution which does not clear the ground for reconciliation, which means self-criticism by the victorious and respect for defeated minorities, has little that is Christian about it".<sup>21</sup> In the immediate context we are dealing with here, one might well ask whether Moltmann is taking sufficiently seriously the complex institutional nature of modern industrial society, and the fact that a Christian prophetic mission not only seeks solidarity with "the people" (whoever they are, but presumably those lacking power), but also engages with those in power, the decision-makers.<sup>22</sup> And there is surely sufficient material in the gospels to indicate that this also was, and is, part of the messianic mission. Simply to set a church *of* the people in opposition to a church *for* the people is to pose an unresolvable and unnecessary antithesis. Surely the messianic mission in some sense always remains a mission *for* the people. The question is how the "for" is worked out in practice. It can be worked out in the form of Lady Bountiful's patronage, which never allows the recipients to become mature, or to be anything other than recipients. Or it can be worked out as solidarity, just as Jesus' being-for-men took the form of being-with-men in his identification with sinners on the cross. But the "being-with" is still in motivation a "being-for" and it is here that Moltmann seems inconsistent, in departing from what he elsewhere affirms as the *inseparability* of being-with-others and being-for-others. Granted that much of the church's care for people is unwarrantably patronising, it is surely not too much to hope that those who acquiesce in subtly dominant forms of "caring" can be brought to a renewed understanding of how their genuine concern to be *for* others will only be fulfilled as they are *with* others, so that the others will in the end be able to take care of themselves.

The fact is that "being-for-others" can be worked out in a number

of styles. We should certainly not be deterred from taking initiatives in mission by a paralysing anxiety about our motives. It is better to begin doing something, and then reflect on what is actually being done, rather than attempting the futile task of getting all our thoughts in order first. A German industrial chaplain, whom I recently asked to comment on Moltmann's distinction (between "for" and "of") in relation to his own work, dismissed it impatiently as being all too easy a criticism to make from behind a desk. And here, if not at other points, Moltmann may indeed be verging on an academic game. Coming to be subject of one's own history, as Moltmann puts it, or coming to maturity, is a *process*. It means coming to independence from domination by others. But the paradox is that coming to independence can never come about independently of others! The child *needs* the parent to let him go, or maybe even push him out into the world. To quote Daniel Jenkins again: "Churches will testify most clearly to the fact that they are on the way to maturity by the way in which they cease to be anxious for their own life and help their members as they play their part in helping the other institutions of society to which they belong to act their own age as those who are responsible in their own place to their creator".<sup>23</sup>

This is still more immediately the case within the life of the local congregation. Picture the young minister fresh from college, inspired by all the recent thinking on the minister as "enabler" of the people, rather than the one who does the real work of the church for them, with their "support". Quite possibly, and hopefully, he may be enthused with Moltmann's own picture of the church of the people among the people, a charismatic community in the fullest sense of the word. How is he to cope with the fact that the people's expectations may still be set in the traditional mould of a ministry "for" the church? There will be a tragic breakdown (in more than one sense) if ministry *for* the people and ministry *of* the people are set over against each other. Between *for* and *of* must be set *with*, just as between the love of the Father and the fruit of the Spirit comes the incarnation of Immanuel. The minister will be for his people by being with them, exploring their real concerns, helping them to articulate their questions and anxieties and to evaluate their priorities, all in the light of the Word for the hearing of which he has a particular responsibility. The adjective "pastoral" need not have all the negative connotations which Moltmann implies.

These reservations notwithstanding, enough has been said to make clear that Moltmann's writings on the church, as on so much else, offer many outstanding insights, study and debate of which will enliven many a ministry and congregation. Not least one welcomes the emphasis he gives throughout to the life of the congregation as festivity, as a counter to the incubus of Protestant moralism which still hangs over us, and to the real meaning of belonging to each other in fellowship. So a hearty Amen to the words with which he concludes *The Open Church*: "Therefore, make the congregation strong!"



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Baptist Quarterly*, XXVII (1978), pp. 248-58.

<sup>2</sup> London, SCM Press, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> London, SCM Press, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>7</sup> London, SCM Press, 1977. It should, however, be noted that the sequence of the appearance of these three main works does not indicate a chronological progression of Moltmann's thought. As he points out, much of the material in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* dates from lectures at least as early as the two previously published books (see pp. xvif).

<sup>8</sup> London, SCM Press, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> *The Crucified God*, pp. 246f.

<sup>11</sup> *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96f.

<sup>14</sup> *The Open Church*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> *The Open Church*, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> London, SCM Press, 1976.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79n.

<sup>22</sup> This criticism is not intended to detract from Moltmann's very valuable writings on the relationship of Church and society in, for example, *Hope and Planning* (London, SCM Press, 1971), *Man* (London, SPCK, 1974), and *The Experiment Hope* (London, SCM, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Jenkins, *Christian Maturity*, p. 76.

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## John Rippon and Baptist Historiography

**J**OHN Rippon (1751-1836) has long been recognised as a significant figure among Particular Baptists. His *Baptist Annual Register* (1790-1802), his hymnody, his leadership among London Baptists as pastor at Carter Lane, Southwark, and his influence in the formation of the Baptist Union are well-known.<sup>1</sup> This article outlines another aspect of Rippon's importance: his contribution to early Baptist historiography. As early as 1773, Rippon claimed<sup>2</sup> in 1800, he had commenced collecting materials for histories of London Baptist churches. This youthful interest was maintained throughout all his days. Materials of a historical nature published in his *Register* will be discussed first, and then his other relevant works.

### **Baptist Register**

The need for writing and preserving Baptist history was emphasized by Rippon in the preface to his *Register*. He began by reviewing the