

MISSION

TOMORROW'S CHALLENGE NOW

MISSION, THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH AND ECUMENISM

The intention of this article is to argue that the form which the church of Jesus Christ takes is directly related to its effectiveness in mission and to the impact which that mission has upon society. For this reason it behoves us not to imagine that issues of church order and renewal are distractions from the 'real task' of the church or matters of ecclesiastical introspection. Rather we should be concerned about church order precisely because the shape of the church determines the shape of the mission. Specifically, at this point several fundamental concerns should be seen to converge. Baptist identity emerges out of distinctive concern for the church to be a covenant community of believers gathered together in freedom under the headship of Christ. Believers' baptism expresses this doctrine of the church. If Baptists have any distinctive witness to give to world and church, it concerns the order and shape of the church - it is *ecclesiological*. Such Free Church¹ ecclesiology has *missiological* implications. The understanding of active and committed discipleship from which it emerges leads to the belief that the church exists under and by the word of God preached. In other words, it implies evangelism. Coincidentally the belief that the church is God's community being formed in the midst of human community provides the crucial insight which makes for the renewing of human community. These concerns converge with the *ecumenical* imperative. If the form of the church and the mission of the church are integrally related, it is of the essence of the Baptist contribution to ecumenical dialogue to urge upon the worldwide church for the sake of mission the reform and renewing of its life along the lines of a Free Church theology.

That the essence of Baptist identity concerns the nature of the church it hardly seems necessary to argue. The various Anabaptist and Baptist movements divide from the rest of the church not over catholic issues of trinitarian orthodoxy or chalcedonian christology nor over protestant emphases on authority and soteriology. In all such issues they are part of the mainstream church in its Reformation mode of existence. They do divide over the nature of the church, insisting that it comprises the truly regenerate, that it is a voluntary community, and that in matters of its faith and conscience, the writ of the state does not run. In the emergence of Free Church and Baptist believers there was a radical threat to the state which the latter was not slow to perceive. According to this new insight, the state had only a relative and enabling role to play in the maintenance of human community. To the ancient cry that faith was so important that everybody should be compelled to share the same one, it replied that faith was so important that all should be allowed freedom to discover and embrace it for themselves. There was agreement about the importance of religious faith but disagreement about how such faith might be propagated. Here also is that dynamic which leads to the rediscovery of evangelism. As faith is not imparted to

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any along with their citizenship but comes in response to the preaching of the Word, the Word must be preached with the object of gathering in those who believe. It is little appreciated that this rebirth of the church's evangelistic thrust has its roots in Free Church theology and life and emerges directly from it.

It has long since been pointed out by K. S. Latourette that the Reformers were not themselves evangelistically minded, and indeed that they expressly denied that the Great Commission was binding on any but the first apostles.² Conversely, Franklin H. Littell has shown that, although there were vocational groups such as the Franciscans which had striven to fulfil the Great Commission, the Anabaptists were among the first to make it binding upon all church members.³ According to Harold Bender, the crucial distinction between these two Reformation groupings at this point is attributable in part to their attitudes to the state: 'The Reformers were not evangelistic (in the strict sense), partly because they adopted the principle of the territorial state church, and the principle that the ruler determines the religion of his people. Thus they were immobilized by political boundaries and the state church concept, whereas the Anabaptists had full mobility'.⁴ Clearly, for as long as the church was wedded to that notion of Christendom according to which church and state reinforced each other, the evangelistic imperative was either forgotten or handed over to the state to fulfil by means of coercion. The genius of the Free Church movement was that it perceived the falsity of this link and, in breaking it, opened up the way for the recovery of a true evangelism. It can only be a source of embarrassment to those who elevate the Reformers that the missionary task only began to be taken up among their followers in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the Pietism of Halle and Herrnhut⁵ while the Anabaptists, by comparison, were 'originally and intensely evangelistic'.⁶ It is consistent with this that believers in the Free Church concept have been in the forefront of the church's missionary expansion, to such an extent that in 1967 Littell could claim: 'Today more than three-fourths of the Protestant missionary staff and resources stem from churches of Free Church parentage'.⁷ For the purpose of the present argument, the fact that historically evangelism re-emerged out of the Free Church tradition indicates that Free Church ecclesiology is conducive to the church's evangelistic mission. Theology will give rise to practice and a theology of the church which stresses the need for response of heart and will to the word of the gospel will stimulate the practice of evangelism. Traditional state churches become evangelistic to the extent that they adopt wittingly or unwittingly the characteristics of the believers' church. The fact that some individual churches in these traditions are strongly evangelistic reflects the leaven of Free Church theology. The idea of a state church, familiar to us from the post-Constantinian era and defended even today as a way of bringing lives and communities under the reign of Christ, actually functions as an obstruction to the fulfilment of the Great Commission. The shape of the church as a believing community of disciples bears directly upon its mission. Where such an understanding of the church is to be found, it will be conducive to evangelism. And where evangelism is engaged in and bears fruit, it will tend to require this shape from the church for the work of nurture and discipling to be fulfilled adequately. The believers' church concept is to be advocated because in the work of mission it is functional as well as inherently right.

Thus far the emphasis has been upon that aspect of mission which is called evangelism. While this a crucial aspect of the task of mission, it is not its sum total. Here again the shape of the church comes into focus. The complement to calling folk to personal decision is the corporate reality of a believing community in the midst of human community which reflects and embodies the life of Jesus Christ and exists as a 'new humanity' in the midst of the old. It is through this community that

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God is at work to renew fallen humanity from within and it may rightly be described as a 'political' community in that it is called to express a way of living together which contradicts and challenges the prevailing patterns of society. According to John Howard Yoder: 'The political novelty which God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ, is not only a vehicle of the gospel or fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission.'⁸ Understood in this way the shape of the church, the way in which it orders its life and lives out its values, is integral to its mission because such living in conformity to Christ offers to the wider human community creative possibilities for living which are not within its power to originate. The church dissents from the majority moral culture not to retreat into a sectarian ghetto but to offer back to that culture creative and life-enhancing possibilities which make for freedom and dignity and which are forged among a community of believing people who are focused upon Christ. The dissenting option, represented by Baptists and others, is not a merely negative response to establishment religion: it is the conviction that there is a higher form of churchmanship.⁹

It would certainly be claiming too much for the Free Church tradition to say that it has consistently held a theology which articulates this aspect of its mission. The articulation of the dimensions of mission along these lines is a relatively recent phenomenon. What the tradition has had is a cluster of deeply perceived insights about what it means to be free which have left their creative mark on British and Western society. These insights have led to the development of 'a pluralist society in which men would learn to live in peace with others with whom they disagreed without resort to the scaffold or the firing squad'.¹⁰ These are positive gains for the living of human life which spring out of the Free Church tradition. We are not in a position to say that this is all that there will be. Indeed, the logic of the case would suggest that the new community in Christ is able to be a constant source of inklings of this kind in so far as it is true to itself in living out its life under Christ's rule. The potential for the transformation of human society is increased in so far as the church, from whatever tradition its various parts may come, learns to acknowledge Christ as the one whose crown rights put it in a position of radical dissent from the alienated structures of human society and equally radical conformity to the pattern of life revealed in him. That the contemporary Free Churches are largely failing to do this does not mean that their fundamental theology is wrong but that they have forgotten what it is.

That ecclesiology and missiology are related in the ways so far suggested indicates both that the church's mission cannot be carried forward by ignoring the shape of the church's life and that cooperation in mission between churches holding differing ecclesiologies must eventually lead to searching questions about what exactly the church is called to be. We cannot afford to sink our differences for the sake of mission but must rather maintain the conversation about the shape of the church because we are involved in mission together. When Baptist believers begin to perceive that Free Church identity is not a quaint oddity that can be safely relegated to the history books but is intimately related to what we are called to be and do for the sake of the world, then perhaps they will grasp that more is at stake than was first thought. In the ecumenical conversations which are an inevitable and desirable part of future Christian existence, Free Church and Baptist Christians have much to gain. What they can give is a clear understanding of the church which, if taken seriously, will increase the church's mission. The letting loose of Free Church theology is one

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of the ways forward if for no other reason than that the universal church must now come to terms with living in a pluralist, post-Constantinian era. It must adopt increasingly the identity of a believers' church and the signs are that this is beginning to happen and to bear fruit. Baptist Christians are in the position of having adopted freely and as a matter of principle that which many are now having to adopt reluctantly and of necessity. In previous generations a sense of grievance, as well as of principle, led our forbears to argue for the disestablishment of the English church. The issue of principle remains, but in addition we are now able to argue that for the sake of the mission of the church the established churches should give up their pretensions and privileges. At least one prominent churchman has begun to argue, although not yet in public or in print and therefore he will not be named, that the mission of the 'established' church would be immensely strengthened in this country if it were to adopt the status of a voluntary community of faith and cease to baptize infants as an act of witness concerning the nature of faith and the Christian life. Here is a train of thought which traces the line of the historical development already indicated: the state-church nexus hinders rather than furthers the mission. The form of the church communicates the wrong message. If the church cannot rely upon the inherent authority of its life and its message, then no amount of state privilege will fill the gap.

It is an encouraging sign that the towering presence in twentieth-century theology, Karl Barth, moved throughout his life time to distinctively Free Church convictions, even though he never carried them through to their logical conclusions. He came to see the church in congregational terms, saying: 'I have demolished the whole concept of church "authority" in both its episcopal and synodical form - and constructed everything (rather like the Pilgrim Fathers) on the congregation.'¹¹ He developed the thought of the church as a 'brotherly Christocracy' and a 'Christocratic brotherhood'.¹² From 1939 onwards he became increasingly critical of infant baptism until he conceded that 'fundamentally Baptists and Mennonites are on the right track in their baptismal practice' and recommended a 'presentation of infants' as a distinct alternative to infant baptism.¹³ He castigated adherence to the notions of the *corpus Christianum* and the *Volkskirche* and saw that the health of the church was tied up with rejection of these forms.¹⁴

Although steadfastly resisted, it is significant that a principled rejection of the older justification of notions of the state church has begun to emerge, although slowly, from within the continental Reformed tradition. Jurgen Moltmann has articulated the shift to a rediscovery of the congregation in his book *The Open Church*: 'It seems to me that the "future of the Reformation" does not lie on the right wing with its Catholic tendencies but on the so-called left wing of the Reformation . . . After the "reformation of doctrine" through the gospel they wanted the "reformation of life" through love. After the "reformation of faith" they wanted the "gathering of the congregation" . . . 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. The Catholic dioceses and the Protestant national churches and denominations are today on the threshold of discovering the congregation. And it is no accident that everywhere in the old territorial-church structures today grass-roots congregations are arising - Christian communities, cells and groups which are changing the church from the inside out and making it into the congregation. There is a great hope in the church; it comes from below, from the grass roots.'¹⁵ Consistent with this shift, Moltmann elsewhere calls for a new baptismal practice in which 'the religious festival of birth and name giving would be replaced by a call event which would make clear the believer's Christian identity . . . So-called voluntary baptism does not really make baptism a matter of

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choice, but is essentially baptism into the liberty of Christ . . . Baptism as the liberating event in a person's life corresponds only to a church which spreads the liberty of Christ.'¹⁶

That Moltmann sees so clearly the relationship between the church's future, its form and its mission, is confirmation of the argument pursued in this article. That he is coming from a tradition, as was Barth, which historically has opposed itself to the understanding of the relationship of church and society espoused in the Free Church way of being the church, is a sign of hope. The essence of ecumenical witness is not the abandoning of the particular Baptist identity which is our stewardship, but the offering of it to the whole church with the renewal of the church in view. Voices like Moltmann's are reminders that in offering Free Church theology in this way we can be assured of the fact that it will have its echoes in the wider Christian community and will be encountered by a movement which comes to meet it from the church universal. In this way we may help towards the renewing of the church for its mission.

NOTES

1. The title 'Free Church' is being used in this article as an affirmative description of the church as a voluntary gathering of those who truly believe and who believe it is wrong to be governed in this by the state, rather than to indicate an accidental trait of legal history. The title 'Free Church' takes the form of the latter in common British usage when, for example, the Episcopalian Church in Scotland is so described. See on this J. H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, 1984) pp.105-6.
2. K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* Vol.3 (Harper and Row, 1939) p.25.
3. Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Macmillan, 1964) p.112.
4. Harold S. Bender, 'Evangelism' in *The Mennonite Encyclopaedia* Vol.II (Herald, 1956) p.269.
5. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (Macmillan, 1968) p.230.
6. Bender, op.cit. p.289.
7. Cited in Durnbaugh op.cit p.238.
8. Cited in Durnbaugh op.cit pp.240-1.
9. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford, 1978) p2.
10. *ibid.* p4.
11. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts* (SCM, 1976) p.343.
12. *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (T. and T. Clark 1958) pp.680-1.
13. *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 (T. and T. Clark 1969) pp.193-4.
14. See the citations in Leonard Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid* (Eerdmans, 1976) p.249.
15. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Open Church*, (SCM, 1978) p117.
16. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (SCM, 1977) pp.241-2.

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