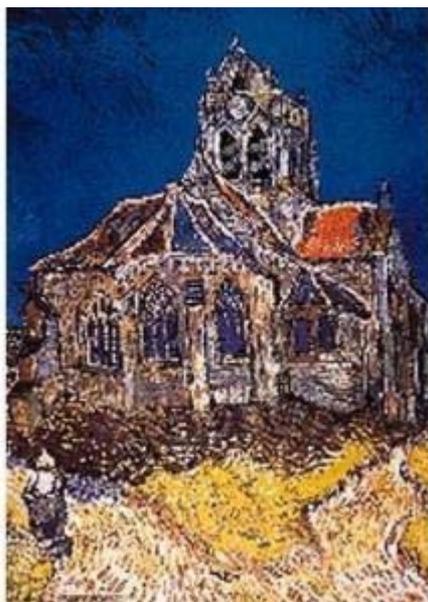


## Anabaptism for the New Millennium?

An exploration in 'free church' and Anabaptist ecclesiology, as a suitable response to contemporary culture.



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Colin Gunton has observed that "...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."<sup>1</sup> In determining the nature and mission of the Church today, the most crucial issue to resolve is our understanding of the way the Church is to reflect God as the *Imago Dei*. Two issues immediately arise: how do we understand the Trinity and to what extent can the Church image that in a fallen world?

Ecclesiologies of the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions have tended to work from presuppositions based on an Augustinian concept of the Trinity. In different ways, in each tradition, hierarchy has tended to result, both in terms of the structures of authority and church discipline and in the prevalence of either traditionalist or complementarian understandings of the relationship between men and women. Miroslav Volf has shown how Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict) works within these categories, locating the essence of the Trinity solely in their relation to one another ('*persona est relatio*'). The philosophical grounding of Augustinian thought is Neo-Platonic, a worldview which encodes hierarchy as normative. Moreover, Augustine worked with a substance metaphysics which naturally emphasises the oneness of the Trinity before its plurality. As Volf notes: "Because [Ratzinger] locates this unity at the level of substance, the one substance of God must take precedence over the non-accidentally conceived persons."<sup>2</sup> With the exception perhaps of Puritan John Owen<sup>3</sup>, most ecclesiologies in the Western tradition until recent times have uncritically assumed a similar starting point.

It is this situation which Gunton laments as inadequate. Volf provides a plausible alternative, describing a relational ontology connected to the post-modern philosophical categories within which he is working. He suggests that a more accurate ontology of the Trinity is to understand the three persons as subjects in themselves, perichoretically in union. Volf describes this union as '*persona in relatio*.' In this Social Trinitarian conceptualisation, the three beings of the Trinity discover their identities both within themselves and in their relationship to one another, rather than in their relationality alone.<sup>4</sup> Volf uses this insight to advocate a non-hierarchical, egalitarian structuring of Church, which Gunton calls "an ecclesiology of perichoresis."<sup>5</sup> Is this good contextualisation or simply an accommodation of prevailing egalitarian sentiments? It is the former: Chalcedon subverted neo-platonic thought in Christology but owing to the Constantinian integration of Church and State this

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Gunton, 'The Church on Earth, The Roots of Community' in ed. Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989 p48

<sup>2</sup> Volf, Miroslav *After our likeness: the church as the image of the Trinity* Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1998 p201

<sup>3</sup> Gunton, 'The Church on Earth' p63

<sup>4</sup> Volf, *After our Likeness* p202

<sup>5</sup> Gunton, 'The Church on Earth' p77

did not lead to a questioning of hierarchical tendencies in ecclesiology. Moreover, this is not simply a post-modern approach, as John Owen's 17<sup>th</sup> century contribution demonstrates.

To what extent can the Church image this understanding of the Trinity in a fallen world? Volf is careful to emphasise that we cannot apply Trinitarian concepts directly into ecclesiology. Humans in their finitude and fallen-ness can only image the Godhead in an imperfect way: "Trinitarian concepts such as 'person', 'relation', or perichoresis' can be applied to human community only in an analogous rather than univocal sense. As creatures, human beings can correspond to the uncreated God only in a creaturely way."<sup>6</sup> This insight carries echoes of Reformed ecclesiology, especially Luther's distinction of the *Opus Dei* and *Opus Hominum*. As Schwobel has pointed out, "according to the Reformers, God's action and human action have to be strictly distinguished in order to perceive their proper relationship."<sup>7</sup> This is true not just for soteriology but ecclesiology as well. The perfect self-donation and mutual identification of the perichoretic Godhead is not possible in a fallen world.<sup>8</sup> The solution, however, is not to eliminate 'horizontal' human difference by instituting hierarchical structures. Instead, it is to recognise the mutual indwelling of the Spirit amongst all believers and to look towards the potential for absolute openness promised in the New Creation.

Avery Dulles shows how John Paul II, influenced by the same Trinitarian ontology as Ratzinger, understood Christ's calling of Peter and the Twelve as the establishment of an institutional hierarchy: "[Jesus] laid the foundations of a hierarchical style of leadership under Peter and the appointment of the twelve, according to the Pope, has an institutional character"<sup>9</sup> This interpretation, however, is underpinned by a distorted hermeneutic resulting from an Augustinian understanding of the Trinity. The result in the Catholic tradition has been a monistic ecclesiology that locates the essence of the Church in the universal Church and sees the identity of believers only in terms of their relationship to the Pope. But as Colin Gunton has pointed out, "One implication of the threefold community that is God is its dynamism: the being of God is a community of energies, of perichoretic interaction. As such, it is difficult to conceive its consistency with any static hierarchy"<sup>10</sup> Authority should therefore be expressed in mutuality, with leadership understood more organically. Every local church should have plurality of leadership, and offices of each church must truly exist to build up every member for works of service.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, an

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<sup>6</sup> Volf, *After our Likeness* p405

<sup>7</sup> Cristoph Schwobel 'The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers' in ed. Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989p119

<sup>8</sup> Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is our social program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the shape of social engagement' *Modern Theology* 14:3 July 1998 p403-423

<sup>9</sup> Avery Dulles *Models of the Church* New York: Gill and MacMillan, 1981p224

<sup>10</sup> Gunton, 'The Church on Earth' p68

<sup>11</sup> See Eph 4:14 in the NIV rather than the ASV - an emphasis on low church rather than high church

egalitarian understanding of female eldership (women and man together image God) is fostered. Paul Rothwell has suggested that the Anabaptist tradition is uniquely placed to express such an approach: "Anabaptism is well suited to this post-modern 'demise of elites', as Anabaptists do not consider there to be any ontological difference between leaders and other congregation members, irrespective of gender, standard of education or spiritual gifting."<sup>12</sup>

This eschewing of institutional hierarchy should not lead to a series of disconnected congregations, but rather to a new form partnership based on relationship. British House churches express this through the office of apostle, who has strategic oversight of churches grouped in particular networks. The danger of such an approach is that it can leave marginalised sectors of society completely under-churched. Only the Church of Scotland has sustained a significant presence in deprived areas of Glasgow. If a parish system is to be de-emphasised, intentional of engagement with the marginalised must be fostered by other means.

In doctrinal terms the transition from institutional to organic involves de-emphasising the Christological influence on ecclesiology while emphasising pneumatology. Catholic ecclesiology has tended to emphasise images of the Body (1Cor10:16-17) over the metaphors of Bride (2Cor11:2) in its descriptions of the Church.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in the Catholic tradition, the Church's inception is traced back to Peter receiving the keys to the Kingdom from Christ, implying a greater coincidence between Kingdom and Church than is warranted. This, combined with a eucharistic-focussed ecclesiology in which the Church is understood to be the Body of Christ in a somatic rather than metaphorical sense, has reinforced an 'overly-realised' eschatology. Gunton also suggests that docetic tendencies in Catholic Christology has facilitated this overly-divinised understanding of its own essence as a Church.<sup>14</sup> It is telling that the Holy Spirit is not mentioned by Avery Dulles' when he states that "the essential constitutive element of a particular church as church, for Vatican Council II, is always the gospel, the Eucharist, and the presence of the apostolic succession in the person of the Bishop."<sup>15</sup>

Catholic ecclesiology has sought to distinguish the Church as God's work rather than man's by building on a tendentially docetic Christology. Better rather to emphasise the humanity of Christ (and consequently the Church), counterbalanced by a greater emphasis on the

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Rothwell 'Evangelical Anabaptism: One Hope for Relevant Mission in a Postmodern Context' in *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 27, Summer 2001. Online: <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/143>

<sup>13</sup> "The Mystical body of Christ is more than an image: for it is a determining aspect of the Church's very nature under its Christological aspect" Dulles *Models of the Church* p221

<sup>14</sup> Gunton, 'The Church on Earth' p65

<sup>15</sup> Dulles *Models of the Church* p230

constitutive role of the Spirit. Colin Gunton has written that "A greater pneumatological emphasis on ecclesiology will allow the Church to be more human in its mission and less divinised....a consequent reduction of stress on the Church's institution by Christ and a greater emphasis on its constitution by the Spirit."<sup>16</sup> The passage in Romans where Paul writes that "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ"<sup>17</sup> suggests that the Spirit's presence defines ecclesiality, not the other way around. In light of this, Matthew 18:20 should not be interpreted in Irenaeus' terms as the universal Church, but rather in Volf's terms as any local body of believers where the Spirit inspires believers to proclaim and live Christ's lordship. The Church's essence is derived from the presence of the Spirit, rather than the Spirit's presence being limited to where the Church is embodied.

Inevitably, such moves lead to a foregrounding of different images of the Church, especially that of the Bride of Christ. Volf suggests that the Church should be understood as the Body of Christ only in the sense of being his Bride.<sup>18</sup> We are not Christ's presence on earth in a somatic sense, but in the sense of being in union with him as in a marriage relationship (Eph 5:25). Here we again see a foregrounding of a relational as opposed to a substance metaphysic. The locus of the Church's inception also shifts: such an ecclesiology tends to emphasise that the Church only came into existence when the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost. Peter preached, but the Church was founded on the movement and authority of the Spirit. As Jurgen Moltmann has said: "For that reason, to trace the Church back historically and dogmatically to the calling of the twelve, and the special call to Peter, is untenable"<sup>19</sup>

Such an emphasis on the Spirit's constitutive power frees the Church to seek first what the Spirit is doing in the world (the *Missio Dei*). This is essential in contemporary society where economic migration and advances in technology create rapid demographic change. But more than this, a reading of the Church as being founded at Pentecost suggests that reconciliation should be central to the mission of the Church. Not just existentialist reconciliation between the individual and God, but embodied reconciliation between ethnic groups and ecological reconciliation with all of creation (2Cor 5:18-19; Col 1:19-20; Rom 8:21). The formation of distinct communities of disciples in unity across socio-ethnic divides and devoted to care for creation will speak powerfully into contemporary issues of racism, poverty, sectarianism and ecological destruction. It also reveals the essence of the Church as multi-(rather than mono-) cultural. This has important implications for contextualisation in a pluralistic society: the value of celebrating cultural diversity must be integral to the Church's mission.

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<sup>16</sup> Gunton, 'The Church on Earth' p62

<sup>17</sup> Romans 8:9b

<sup>18</sup> Volf, *After our Likeness* p142

<sup>19</sup> Moltmann, Jurgen *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* London: SCM, 1975 p148

It is nevertheless true that the Church is instituted by Christ, and we must not lose the balance that Christology brings to ecclesiology. But our ecclesiology must image Christ in a creaturely way, balancing docetism with an emphasis on Jesus' humanity. A divinised Church which takes upon itself too much authority to act on behalf of God has been the hallmark of Christendom and, when matched to the power of the nation-state, caused the destruction of the Crusades and the religious persecution of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe. While our ecclesiologies must stress a dependency on Christ's divine power to defend his Church from hostile powers (Matt 16:18), we must be wary of taking this role upon ourselves in the political sphere. Andrew Rollinson has emphasised that "Mission does not flow out of power, strength and domination, but out of honesty and solidarity with a hurting world."<sup>20</sup> Jesus' humanity shapes the mission of the Church by emphasising vulnerability, powerlessness and suffering. This has long been a hall-mark of the Anabaptist tradition,<sup>21</sup> rooted in its early experiences of persecution. The Anabaptist response is to create an alternative polity<sup>22</sup> rather than colluding with existing political power. Today, politics in the UK is increasingly being devolved to the local level. Perhaps it is here, building grassroots coalitions and advocating for justice on behalf of minority groups, that the Church should concentrate its missional efforts.

Similar issues must be confronted in the Church's evangelistic efforts. The pluralistic environment of post-Christendom means not only that assumptions cannot be made that people will automatically identify with church culture, but also that the Church no longer has power to impose its views. As Rodney Clapp has said: "Constantinian evangelism, as we have noted, was often coercive or manipulative. Christianity was forced on non-Christians. Yet we Christians now dwell in a world we do not control...We are truer to the faith of the suffering servant we call Lord when we propose rather than impose."<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, as Andrew Rollinson points out, "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"<sup>24</sup> Is an individualistic Lutheran soteriology of moral holiness now sufficient? Perhaps, instead, NT

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Rollinson *Liberating Ecclesiology: Setting the Church Free to live out its Missionary Nature* Booklet: The Whitley Lecture, 2005 p29

<sup>21</sup> Paul Rothwell 'Evangelical Anabaptism' Online: <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/143>

<sup>22</sup> "the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price" Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William H. *Resident Aliens* Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989 p48

<sup>23</sup> Rodney Clapp *Peculiar People : the church as culture in a post Christian society* Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1996 p170

<sup>24</sup> Rollinson *Liberating Ecclesiology* p20

Wright's emphasis on God's righteousness as the bestowal of covenant promises on a community walking with Jesus Christ is a better approach.<sup>25</sup> Using the gift of hospitality to invite people into a community of resident aliens (1 Peter 2:11) that recognise the Kingdom may be the way forward. It is interesting in this regard that three of the hallmarks of Emergent churches according to Gibbs and Bolger are that they "identify with the life of Jesus," "live highly communal lives" and "welcome the stranger."<sup>26</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to magisterial and revivalist ecclesiologies in which everyone is assumed to be Christian and church is centred round an event where the sacraments are rightly given and the word rightly preached. Instead, a return to the original understanding of 'ekklesia' as a community called-out and set apart is more helpful.

Much of what has already been discussed is drawn together by an analysis of the eschatological dimension of church life. As Miroslav Volf has written: "The all-embracing framework for an appropriate understanding of the Church is God's eschatological new creation."<sup>27</sup> If the Church's meaning is rooted in the being of the Trinity, and its mission derived from the *Missio Dei* as enacted by the Spirit, then reverse-engineering ecclesiology from the divine perspective of the eschaton is essential.

First, ecclesiologies of whatever tradition can become too hierarchical and oriented to the present moment. This is true in catholic ecclesiology especially because of its tendency towards a docetic Christology and institutional ecclesiality, but other traditions are by no means exempt. The eschatological dimension reminds us that the Church is essentially on a journey towards the perfection of the New Creation. It is a sign or 'proleptic anticipation', to use Moltmann's terminology: "[The Church] is a 'messianic fellowship', a community of those who, through union with Christ and the Spirit, participate in Christ's mission orientated towards the coming Kingdom of God."<sup>28</sup> Contrary to Catholic notions of the true Church being the universal Church in historic time, with local churches subordinate to this, local churches are proleptic embodiments of the eschatological universal Church. This is the correct location for our understanding of the universal Church, because only in the New Creation will all believers from all times be truly present with one another. Peter T. O'Brien has shown that Paul's understanding of 'ekklesia' in specific sections of Colossians and Ephesians is of the heavenly eschatological Church rather than the historic universal Church, as

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<sup>25</sup> Wax, Trevin K. 'N.T. Wright & The New Perspective on Paul' Online: <http://www.ntwrightpage.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Post-modern cultures* London: SPCK, 2006 p45

<sup>27</sup> Volf, *After our Likeness* p128

<sup>28</sup> Rollinson *Liberating Ecclesiology* p32

commonly assumed.<sup>29</sup> The concept of local churches as proleptic anticipations of the heavenly Church imparts a dynamism and flexibility to the Church's mission.

Secondly, eschatology reminds us of the future reality that all cultures and tribes will be part of a renewed cosmos, born from those resurrected in Christ. This reinforces the emphasis previously made on the Church's mission as reconciliation. In a pluralistic context, the Church should propose to people of all cultures that they follow a call from Christ to embody this reconciled community today as an anticipation of the coming Kingdom. Thirdly, and in the same vein, an understanding of bodily resurrection and a renewed cosmos drives the Church towards holistic mission, in terms of caring for the whole person and the whole environment. Finally, the eschatological dimension provides a firm basis for a theology of hope in the face of post-modern nihilism. The Church's mission must be not only to proclaim this hope in the coming Kingdom but to invite people to take part in it today, embodying an alternative vision in a committed, relational community.

A critical understanding of ecclesiology in the light of contemporary culture and the various theological disciplines (especially the Trinity and eschatology) points towards an adaptation of anabaptistic forms of church life as a highly appropriate way to express the Church's meaning and mission today: Base Ecclesial Communities developing from Catholic structures, Emergent churches developing out of Reformed structures, the UK House Church movement, the Church of Scotland's 'Church Without Walls' agenda, and the rise of new monastic communities are all examples of contemporary ecclesiologies that confirm this claim.

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<sup>29</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, 'The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity' in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. Don Carson Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House Book House, 1987 p93

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