

# It might be emerging, but is it church?

**A**t a theological conference I attended recently, one of the presenters, outlining some of the factors in the changing context for theological education, referred to “fresh expressions”. He said this was a

Indeed it is interesting in reading on the movement globally how much New Zealand comes up as being, along with, Australia and the United Kingdom, one of the key initiators. Mike Riddell and Mark Pierson

from New Zealand, and Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch from Australia are seen as pioneers. I might add that as well as being from down under, they, along with Taylor, are Baptists, a heritage of course I share myself, a factor which is not irrelevant and to which I will return.

A Google search of “emerging church” yields about 1,530,000 entries. So what are we to make of what Scot McKnight calls “the most controversial and misunderstood movement in the church today”?<sup>2</sup> One article that caught the eye was titled “Emerging Churches – Heroes or Heretics?” Clearly unambivalent about the answer to that question was a brochure I received at the begin-

ning of the year. It blazed out: “The last days Apostasy. Coming to a church near you. The emergent church.” It warns that “With the move of the Church back to Rome through organisations like evangelicals and Catholics

together, Alpha, Promise Keepers and Interfaith dialogue ... Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven and now the postmodern Emergent wave ... believe that today’s postmodern culture

needs a more relevant and experiential approach to God, Church and Worship. Eg. Playing U2 as an expression of worship, using multi-sensory stimulation, candles, icons, art, images, stained glass etc.” And it warns “The Emergent Church has taken hold in New Zealand and its teachings have been aired on Radio

**“It might be emerging, Jim ...”**



more appropriate term than the previously favoured descriptor for experimental faith communities, “emerging church”, since, as it turned out, most of what was emerging was not church. He was Anglican and the term “fresh expressions” is a phrase developed by the Church of England for some of its new developments. But the term “emerging church” is still widespread and gains much attention from younger church leaders in New Zealand. At the VisionNZ Conference last year, one of the major presentations was called “A Kiwi Emerging Church: Yeah Right!”<sup>1</sup> This was given by Steve Taylor, who has emerged as the leading spokesperson for emerging church in New Zealand, and a significant global voice.

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Rhema and [are] also being taught in the Bible College of New Zealand." This was obviously written in pre-Laidlaw College days.

We need of course to ask the question why this movement has arisen. The broad answer is fairly simple: it is part of a number of responses over the past half century to the increasingly obvious fact that the church in particular and Christian faith in general have been having a rather difficult time of it in western societies like New Zealand. I have written in a number of places on this, as have many others, and have no intention of rehearsing the supporting information. It is simply a given, whatever figures one uses and however positive the spin one tries to put on them. There have been many responses to this post-Christian, or perhaps more correctly post-Christendom reality, from the "God is Dead" theologies of the 60s, through the Church Growth movement of the 70s and Cell Churches of the 80s, to the Seeker Sensitive Churches of the 90s. Despite all these grand initiatives the rot continues.

### Emerging emerging

What emerged in the 1990s was the realisation among some that not only were our western societies post-Christendom, but they were also postmodern, at least

***"What emerged in the 1990s was the realisation among some that not only were our western societies post-Christendom, but they were also postmodern, at least in part."***

in part. That term is rather problematic, and again it is not my intention to explore all the issues around it. However in the broadest sense it is helpful to identify the fact that the cultural, social and intellectual world we live in today is very different from that which existed in 1960, even if there may well be more continuities than discontinuities. In this world, all sorts of institutions that have existed for centuries have increasingly struggled. A number of Christian thinkers and leaders began arguing that the problem with all the recent efforts to reorganise church for our post-Christendom world, was that they were still based on the assumptions and thinking of a modern society and culture. As modernism was rapidly diminishing and being replaced by postmodern forms so these attempts were simply short term arrangements, much like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Something more fundamental was needed.

There have been many attempts to define the emerging church movement, some helpful, others not. Perhaps the simplest and most widely used is that by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger in their study of the phenomenon, *Emerging Churches*.<sup>3</sup> They define the movement as "communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures." Brian McLaren, who has

emerged as the movement's main spokesperson, wrote in the first of his many books in 1998:

*You see, if we have a new world, we will need a new church. We don't need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new Spirit, but a new spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new kind of Christian. Not a new denomination, but a new kind of church ... The point is ... you have a new world.*<sup>4</sup>

Overall I would agree with the broad parameters of this argument. Australian missiologist Randall Prior summarised it at the Presbyterian General Assembly last year as follows: "The form of the church which evolved in the era of Christendom and which served us well in that period is no longer sustainable. It is dying. It will die." However I do want to add at least one cautionary note. Often the people involved in the emerging church movement use rather hyperbolic language, as if the church has only ever existed in one form or shape since the inception of Christendom – this is often referred to as inherited church – and that traditional form now needs to be discarded and a brand new form developed. This is of course quite misleading. The form and shape of the church has constantly changed throughout its 2000-year history. We see this even in the New Testament, and writers such as Hans Kung, David Bosch

and Andrew Walls have provided helpful ways of understanding this.

Andrew Walls invites us to imagine a long living, scholarly visitor from space, a Professor of Comparative Inter Planetary Religions, able to get periodic study

grants to visit planet earth every few centuries, to study earth religion, Christianity, on principles of Baconian induction. He visits a group of Jerusalem Jewish Christians about 37 CE; his next visit is in about 325 CE to a Church Council in Nicaea; then in about 650 CE he visits a group of monks on a rocky outcrop in Ireland; in the 1840s he visits a Christian assembly in Exeter Hall, London, promoting mission to Africa; finally in 1980 he visits Lagos, Nigeria, where a white robed group is dancing and chanting through the streets on the way to church. At first glance the groups visited might appear to have nothing in common at all, but on deeper analysis he finds an essential continuity about the significance of Jesus, the use of the Scriptures, of bread, and wine, and water. But, writes Walls, he recognises that these continuities are "cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to their environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon."<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of this debate about these emerging new forms of church life is the question of just what is the relationship between the historic faith and the environment in which it presently finds itself, between Christ and culture, of theology to context. This question

is actually at the heart of many of the disputes that go on in the church, as well as some significant debates in theological institutions, including mine.

### Church and culture

When it comes to the relationship between the church and the culture that surrounds it, there is a number of different models used to explain the various orientations. The classic work, which has formed the basis for all following discussions, is that of Richard Niebuhr, in *Christ and Culture*.<sup>6</sup> He identifies five basic models: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. It seems, though, that the alternatives can be more simply discussed by reducing these to three.

(i) An “anticultural” response, “Christ against culture”. The attitude where the church sets itself up in opposition to the prevailing culture. The difficulty with this position is that there is no such thing as a culture-free articulation of theology or understanding of the church. Consequently this position, while opposing contemporary culture, is in fact usually holding on to some culture of the past. The Amish, for example, hold on to the culture of early nineteenth-century German settlers in Pennsylvania, traditional Anglicans to 1950s England, and many fundamentalists to the pre-1960s American south.

(ii) An “accommodationist” response, “Christ of culture”. This is the opposite, where the church is so anxious to fit into the world that it becomes merely an extension of the culture and has lost any distinguishing particularity as a culture of its own. This response assumes the congruence of church and culture. It is assumed that the primary symbols of the church and of the culture are identical. The church sees itself in some way as representative of the culture at large and prides itself on its shaping, transforming role. Churches in nations where the two grew up together often exhibit the most radical forms of this. This has been a strong tendency towards liberalism in western countries and can be seen as a major factor in the decline of mainstream denominations. The view fails to recognise that there is a basic incompatibility between the church and whatever time in which it lives.

(iii) An “incarnational” response. This response recognises some kind of tension between Christ and culture, as is found in all of Niebuhr’s final three categories. There is both continuity and discontinuity. Lesslie Newbigin rightly insists that the gospel only retains “its proper strangeness, its power to question us ... when we are faithful to its universal supranational,

supranational, supracultural nature.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the gospel travels through time not in some ideal form, but from one inculturated form to another. Consequently what missiologists call the “culturally indigenous church” is the aim of the incarnational approach.

### Textuality and contextuality

A number of different terms are used to describe this approach to culture. The one that I find most helpful is “contextualisation”, although heated debate over its precise meaning continues, with ecumenical and

evangelical interpretations differing considerably. At the core, though, is a recognition that many aspects of what humans believe, think, and do are contextually shaped. William Reiser defines it as “the process of a

deep, sympathetic adaptation to, and appropriation of, a local culture in which the Church finds itself, in a way that does not compromise its faith.”<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of the process is the model of the incarnation. In Jesus, God took seriously the human context in all its particularity. Jesus was a historical person and so he was chronologically, geographically, religiously and culturally a first-century Jew. He repudiated neither his humanity nor his Jewishness. The early church continued that stance as the gospel moved out of the language and culture of Jesus and his disciples into that of Graeco-Roman culture. Ever since, those most effective in mission have “assumed that any culture can be host to Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the critical point to note in an authentic contextual or incarnational approach is that there are limits to how far culture can set the agenda or determine the shape. Andrew Walls reminds us there are two important principles. On the one hand there is the “indigenising” principle, which affirms that the gospel is at home in every culture and every culture is at home with the gospel. But then there is the “pilgrim” principle, which warns us that the gospel is never fully at home in any culture and will put us out of step with every society.

So there are two critical dimensions, which Max Stackhouse defines as the “textuality” of the church – its faithfulness to the gospel – and its “contextuality” – its faithfulness to the world in which it finds itself.<sup>10</sup> Hans Kung contends that we should aim for a “critical correlation” between the biblical message and the paradigm of the culture” and that “the task today is to come to terms with a postmodern paradigm”.<sup>11</sup> The emerging church movement is endeavouring to take that task seriously and is to be commended for that.

To bring a personal perspective to bear, this article is in a very real sense part of an ongoing and unfinished

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conversation with myself. A few years ago, I gave an inaugural lecture at Knox, which was also published in *Stimulus*, called "Is New Zealand's Future Churchless?"<sup>12</sup> I outlined the paradox of countries like New Zealand where the data showed an ongoing resilience of relatively high levels of religious, and mainly Christian, believing and relatively low and declining levels of religious belonging. In light of this, while it seemed religion was destined to continue rather than die out, as had been previously postulated in various forms of secularisation theory, the church itself may face a somewhat tenuous and uncertain future.

I suggested that it would continue but needed to develop many more diverse forms, and these in essence would be "less church" in the sense of being much

looser, less institutionalised, more eclectic, fluid rather than solid. Sounds much like emerging church!

A number of people, more theologically inclined than I, raised the question with me of "Where is the theology in all of this?" Always a fair enough question. In this instance it was a timely reminder to me that central to my own thesis was the proposition that churches which had thrived had not only shown an ability to adapt their life and message to their rapidly changing cultural and social situation, but had also held a strong commitment to the central tenets of orthodox Christian belief. My major focus has been on the first half of that proposition, endeavouring to help churches realise that the forms their life and message have taken have been wedded to a cultural and social context that has not existed for some time, and while they continue in their current form they indeed have a rather limited future. They are no longer incarnating the gospel in their context. As Phil Goff put it after taking on the leadership of the Labour Party following the heavy defeat in the last election, they have "lost touch with their electorate" and "need to reconnect". Change is the essential challenge for the church, and I continue to be invited to help a broad range of churches understand the context they are in and how they might change to become culturally connected.

Now this is an essential task. While in some realms of theology we might be able to argue for some pure theology of the word – although I am somewhat sceptical about both the possibility and worth of that – even that great theologian Karl Barth – so often used to buttress the case for disregarding context when it comes to constructing theology, that it must be based solely on the self revelation of God in Christ – argued when it came to the church:

*... in every age and place its constitution and order have been broadly determined and conditioned by political, economic, and cultural models more or less imperatively forced on it by its situation in world history ... It has*

*had and still has to adapt or approximate itself to these in order to maintain itself ... in respect of the form of its existence ... there is no sacred sociology [of the church].<sup>13</sup>*

### Marks of the church – does anything go?

There are then no sacred forms of church, however sacrosanct existing forms might appear to some. Of course we in the reformed tradition have always held this to be so, holding central to our understanding the reformation principle, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. If then the church has its forms determined by whatever

the current "political, economic and cultural models" of "its situation in world history" are, does that mean that anything goes? That the answer to those who pose theological questions about

changes in church life is that "theology does not have a place in determining the form of church life"? That in fact ecclesiology is a pointless discipline? That there is not a theology of the church, merely a praxis?

It is interesting to review literature on the church from a historical perspective. For centuries the basic question to answer was "What are the marks of a true church?" From the 1970s onwards the nature of the question changed by one word. Instead of "What are the marks of a true church?" it was "What are the marks of a successful church?" The word "successful" was sometimes interchanged with the word "growing", since to be successful was equated with growing.

Probably two things lay behind this. As the decline of churches in the West became increasingly evident, the overwhelming preoccupation became with turning decline into growth. As the church splintered into greater and greater variety as the culture became more and more diverse, it was seen as a hopeless task to try to presume there was any true form. This was reinforced by a developing culture that was suspicious of any insistence on adherence to one particular form or expression in any area of life. Indeed ideology became the enemy, grammar was fascist, theory was irrelevant, praxis was what mattered. I might add that in New Zealand, which has always had a bent toward pragmatism and suspicion of intellectualism, all of this found fertile ground.

And so in the emerging church movement there is a sense of anything goes. For those for whom tradition or inherited forms are in fact the obstacle to being effective churches and a barrier to the mission of Jesus, it is a waste of time to listen to what the past might have to say about how the church should form its life. Graham Redding may have asked the question, did Calvin have any place in the Café Church?<sup>14</sup> But café church is relatively mild fare and rather orthodox when church can apparently be a bunch of kids at a skate board park or BMX track, a group of students gathering in pub

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or dance club, or some mid-life couples sharing a few wines and a movie together.

So when is a gathering of followers of Jesus actually a church? Earlier this year I spent three months in the United Kingdom. Many of those I met with were involved in resourcing Fresh Expressions or the Emerging Church movement and I found it was the question of ecclesiology that dominated their concerns. There was a growing realisation that unless the movement is undergirded by solid ecclesiology then it may well suffer the same fate as the failed alternative worship and church planting movements of the 1990s.

Many of those engaged in experimental forms of church argue that because Jesus promised that “whenever two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”, any such gathering is church. Within the Baptist tradition this is the primary definition that is used, as it is in the Pentecostal and Charismatic streams. The presence of Jesus by the Spirit is all that matters. It is thus no coincidence that many of the initiators of the emerging church movement in New Zealand and Australia have been Baptist. Such a simple definition leaves them much freer to experiment with a diversity of forms, particularly when the focus on the autonomy of the local congregation means they do not have to get permission from some regional or national body. I would hasten to add that in the past I would also have held that this was sufficient. It is interesting to observe though that the Baptist movement in New Zealand, after having been driven by a fairly pragmatic approach for the past couple of decades or so, is now acknowledging it has significant problems and challenges. The current leader of the movement said to me late last year “our first task is to get our ecclesiology sorted out”. In other words, even for Baptists ecclesiology seems to matter in the long run, even if in the short term pragmatism can produce results.

Further reflection however has made me realise that even though I had moved from the Baptist to the Presbyterians some six years ago I was still more Baptist than I imagined. As I mentioned, half of my thesis argued that effective churches had maintained a strong commitment to the central beliefs of orthodox Christian faith. I identified these as being beliefs about Jesus Christ, about God, about Scripture and about mission, and used the Nicene Creed to define these. Nothing about the church though. No ecclesiology. And of course the Nicene Creed does include among its statements “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church”. So if we use this as a measure how does the emerging movement measure up? Is it in fact church?

### ... One...

Everybody affirms the unity or the oneness of the church, but ever since the Schism of 1054 that oneness has been somewhat difficult to locate, and since the splintering of the Reformation even more so. Daniel Migliore helpfully defines it as “a distinctive unity rooted in communion with God through Christ in the Spirit. The unity of the church is a fragmentary and

provisional participation in the costly love of the triune God.”<sup>15</sup> Recent trinitarian theology with its focus on a plurality within an essential oneness is helpful for us in understanding how the Christian gospel embraces both diversity and unity. Much of the New Testament tackles this issue. The unity of the church does not lie in either a controlling doctrinal conformity or a formal institutional structure, and I would eschew all endeavours to impose either of those kinds of unity on the church. Within the diversity of our expressions unity lies in the life we participate in together with the triune God. As Hans Kung expresses it, “It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God.”<sup>16</sup>

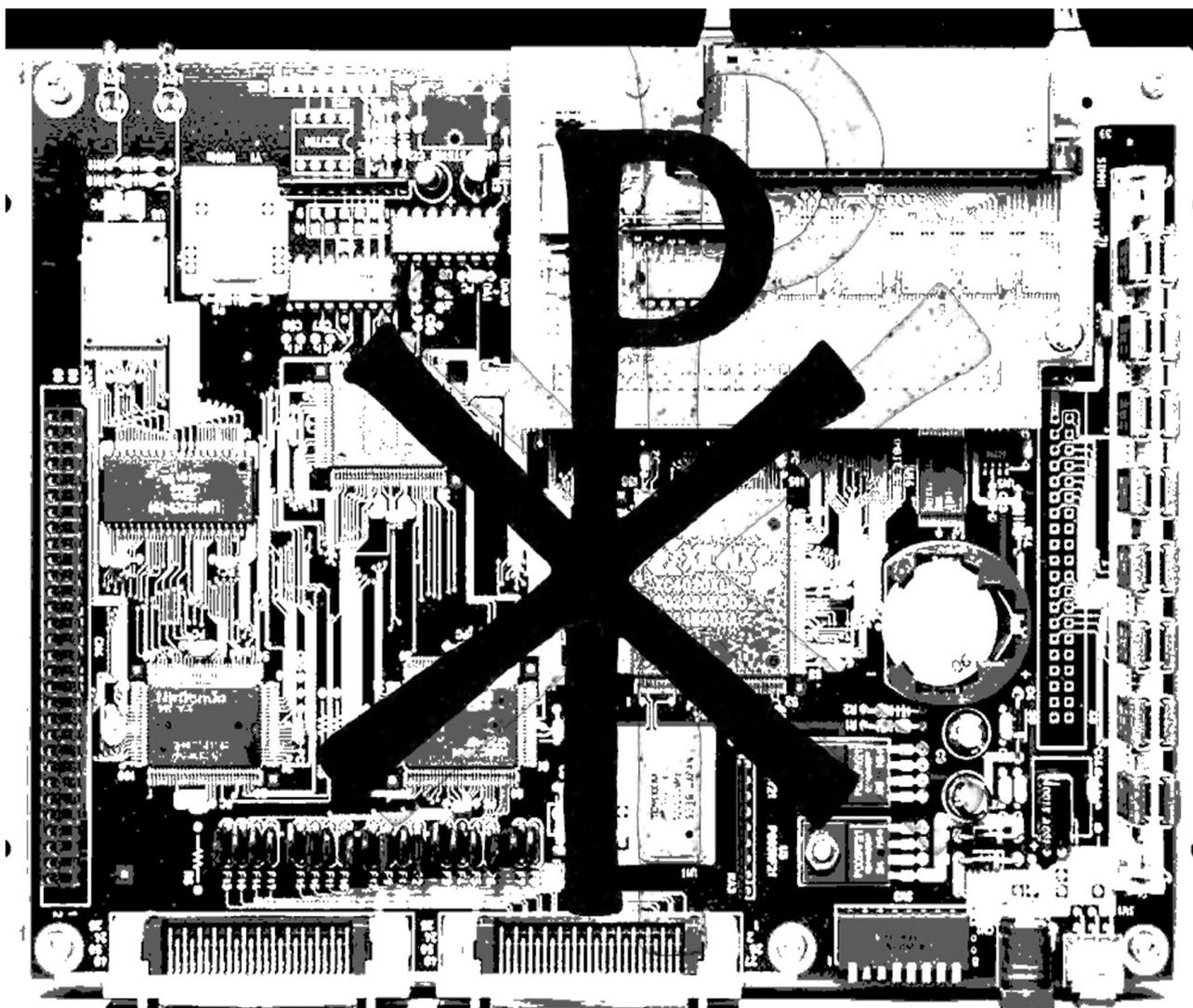
However, ever since the Reformers placed the focus on seeing the unity of the church in the invisible church rather than the visible church, that understanding has been used as a way of enabling churches and their leaders to do little about working to see unity as a visible mark of the church in its present reality. We have continued to be happily schismatic, tearing apart the fabric of church whenever we find something on which we differ. This “creeping congregationalism”, which afflicts all varieties of church life in contemporary societies, heightens the tendency to focus on the local and the particular, as if that is all there was to being church. Jesus left behind a visible community not an invisible concept. A community he called to be one, and so it is incumbent on we who are the church to continually work hard to find ways to express in our increasingly diverse culture that this oneness is a reality, not merely some ethereal and mystical entity. If the life of the Trinity is the model of our unity, then it does involve the diverse members working synergistically together for the glory of the one.

One of my concerns about the emerging church movement is that with its brisk dismissal of inherited forms of church life, its distancing itself from tradition, and its reluctance to work with the church as it is, it is magnifying the image of a divided church and failing to put energy into working hard at ways to give expression to and so maintain the unity of the church. While I would admire the movement’s willingness to engage with our cultures and seek to find new ways of incarnating the gospel and church within those, I believe it would be more true to being the church of Jesus Christ in the world today if it sought to do that by working with the church as it already is. Brian McLaren says we need “a new church”. There is only one church, and it already is. The challenge is to continue to work within that church so it might better faithfully be the presence of God in Christ through the Spirit in the diverse communities it inhabits.

### ... Holy ...

The word holy and the concept of holiness are hardly popular in our contemporary context, either inside or outside the church. “Holy” raises images of a “holier than thou” judgmentalism and an isolationist separatism fearful of contamination by an evil world. A

“By this sign you shall conquer”



“I can’t get this thing to re-boot! There’s a short circuit in here somewhere!”

preoccupation with holiness, it is suggested, has been a major hindrance to the mission of the church in the world. Identification and engagement with the world is what the creator God is about. “Holy” is of course the primary word used to name the essence of the nature of God. It is, if you like, what marks out God as God, as distinctly different from everything else in creation. It is something that belongs essentially to God. For other things or persons to be described as holy therefore is to claim that they also are marked by the essence of the character of God, and in this way are to some extent different from the rest of creation.

But how do we know what God is like if we are to share in that character? The central claim of the New Testament and of Christian thought is that the fullest revelation of God is to be found in the human person Jesus Christ. By looking at the life of Jesus we see what it is like to live a human life marked by the character, or holiness, of God. But more than that, the New Testament claims that by his death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit Christ mediates the very life of God so we can share in the fellowship of the Trinity. Here is the essence of the holiness of the church. It can be identified by the degree to which it lives a life reflecting the

glory of God seen in Christ and this is made possible by the presence of the Spirit in its midst. When we do this we will demonstrate a distinctive quality to our life that will indeed mark us out as different, distinct from others; as Peter put it a "peculiar people". While this quality of holiness will be demonstrated in the church in an imperfect way, as Calvin says, it is the "measure toward which it is daily advancing".

As suggested in my overview of the relationship

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of church and culture, the church lives in a relationship of some tension with whatever culture it lives in. It needs to both incarnate the gospel into that culture but also allow the gospel to transcend and judge every culture in which it is present. Part of the problem with Christendom and the way of being church that developed in that context, is that it ended up identifying the culture of those societies as being Christian, and then simply became a reflection of the societies in which they existed. The church was no longer a distinct or holy people. As the society and the culture in which the church existed changed rapidly in the post war era it ended up with nothing left to offer the new societies which emerged and was seen as an antiquarian reminder of a world that once was. Dean Inge said in the nineteenth century that "If you marry the spirit of the age you will find yourself a widow in the next." Sadly this has come to be true of much of mainline Protestantism in the West, including many of its evangelical expressions, who are shaped more by the values of the consumer market and business models than the gospel. The emerging church movement has been quite right in much of the critique it has offered on how traditional church life had been simply an expression of modern western life and values.

But while some of its analysis is invaluable, in its headlong rush to become relevant to the emerging culture of a postmodern world, it runs the risk of making the same mistake. It may end up wedding itself to the spirit of this age, just as firmly as the church it critiques

may have to a previous age. When the wonders of this age begin to wind down – and it might be a phase in history that is much more short lived than the previous – where will it be then? What will it have to offer and to say when all its own inadequacies have been laid bare? The emerging church articulates strongly an incarnational theology and understands Jesus almost solely in these terms. Yet any serious reading of the life and ministry of Jesus will identify that while he did live

incarnationally within the culture of first-century Judaism, he also lived in considerable tension with most in that culture, at times spoke judgement on it, and ended up being rejected by it. If he was simply concerned with relevance, why was he strung up on a cross?

At times it is difficult to distinguish an emerging café or night club church from any other café or night club down the street. Postmodern culture is neither any better nor any worse than modern culture. So emerging leaders celebrate the death of modernity and raise three cheers for the arrival of postmodernity, without recognising the need to provide a proper critique of that which is problematic for living a Christ-shaped life. On the other hand, some critics of the emerging movement such as Don Carson and David Wells see only a culture antithetical to Christ in postmodernity, and fail to recognise they are just as closely wedded to the culture of modernity. Whatever culture we happen to be in as the church of Jesus Christ, we need first to allow Christ by the Spirit to form us into a distinctive culture which preaches the unique holy life of our trinitarian God in the language of the time and place in which it is set.

**... Catholic ...**

The affirmation of the catholicity of the church refers to its universality and inclusivity. It is the church that has existed everywhere, always, and for all. It guards the church against parochialism, sectarianism, racism, and chronological conceit. It is clear that both the unity and

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the catholicity of the church go together, they are two interwoven dimensions of the one church. However, as with oneness, we need to guard against it being understood merely as an abstract kind of universalism hovering over the particularities of culture and history. Again it is a mark that needs to be demonstrated in the life of the visible church, its expression being in the life of local congregations. Avery Dulles claims that catholicity “is not the accomplished fact of having many members or a wide geographical distribution, but rather the dynamic catholicity of a love reaching out to all and excluding no one.”<sup>17</sup> I would agree with Daniel Migliore that the “church today needs to interpret the meaning of catholic as inclusive of all kinds of people”.<sup>18</sup> What might this mean for us today?

One of the major trends of the post-1960s world of the global village has been a growing pluralism of our societies. Not just through the coming to societies such as New Zealand of markedly different cultural groups from overseas, but also by the breakup of the dominant white European culture into a multiplicity of subcultures. Not only is this across generations, but also within generations, so much so that since the beginning of the 1990s it has been pointless to talk even about youth culture. This pluralisation has been heightened by the fact that increasingly people do not live their life in one geographical place where they might mix with people of a wide variety of ages and cultures, but rather are mobile and live their life with communities of choice, usually consisting of people of the same culture as themselves. Often these subgroups are quite exclusive, having their own distinctive language, symbols, and lifestyles. At a time in the past when people in a community lived their lives in that particular community, when generations shared many of the activities of life together, the local church embraced within its community members from every walk and stage of life within that community. It was catholic and inclusive in that sense. This was the parish or family church, an increasingly rare bird in our pluralistic society. How do we reach people today within all these different cultural subgroups, when the culture of church as it represents that culture of a bygone age?

The answer of much of the emerging church is that we need separate churches to incarnate the gospel into all those cultural subgroups. And so we have youth church, student church, young adults church, young marrieds church, breakfast church, café church, biker church; and so on and so on. These churches become quite age- or culture-specific. One practical question to ponder is what happens to these churches when their

particular niche finishes?

But there is a bigger issue. Murray Robertson completed 40 years of pastoral ministry at Spreydon Baptist by serving last year as the President of the New Zealand Baptist Church. During the year he travelled widely throughout New Zealand, visiting many churches, and wrote a series of columns in the Baptist Magazine on his observations. In one of these he noted that churches now “tend to divide along shared interest lines” and there is “an age based apartheid”. He writes, “Maybe this is part of the phenomenon of people looking for a church in which they will feel comfortable, but ... something quite precious is lost when you only meet and share with people who are pretty much identical to yourself.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, is it a church when its membership is so exclusively limited to some subgroup that others are in fact shut out?

The emerging church movement is to be commended for its recognition that in our multicultural world

there is no one expression of the gospel that will incarnate it for “all” those, even within one community in New Zealand. They draw correctly on the missional principle Paul spells out in 1 Corinthians 9 of becoming “all things to all peoples so that I might by all possible means save some”.

But that needs to be balanced by the ecclesial principle he spells out in Ephesians 2, talking about the major cultural divide

of his world, that between Jew and Gentile, that “Christ ... Has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall ... to create in himself one new humanity.” Maybe what is a legitimate mission group is not in fact a church. It needs to see itself as part of the church catholic, and commit itself to being part of that church, and share its life with the greater whole in its lived practices, so that in this fractured, divided, tribalised world people may see that the gospel makes a difference, that estranged groups can be reconciled, that in Christ cultural separation might be transcended and that the new community of God’s people is inclusive of people of every race and every tribe and every tongue, even here now on earth. Might these questions also be asked of ethnic specific churches? To quote David Bosch:

*The new fellowship transcends every limit imposed by family, class or culture. We are not winning people like ourselves to ourselves but sharing the good news that in Christ God has shattered the barriers that divide the human race and has created a new community. The new people of God has no analogy; it is a “sociological impossibility” that has become possible.*<sup>20</sup>

... Apostolic ...

A number of those in the missional church movement define the apostolicity of the church as its essential missional nature. That before it is anything else it is missional. While it is true the word apostle does have in it the idea of one who is sent, and while I agree fully with the sentiment being expressed, I do not believe that particular interpretation of apostolic as a mark of

in truth the evangelical succession, the continuing and unadulterated proclamation of the gospel of the risen Christ."<sup>21</sup>

It is of course one thing to affirm that "our supreme rule of faith is the Word of God" as the Presbyterian Church does or that "the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice", as a Baptist church might. It is quite another to interpret what those words

*To the Angel in the Church of Cappuccino - write this: . . .*



*I know of your aspirations to serve through crockery. Yet this I have against you, your lattes are lukewarm and overburdened with marshmallows, which I detest.*

church is how it was understood by those who created the Nicene Creed or historically within the church. In confessing the apostolicity of the church we are acknowledging that the true church is founded on the apostles. The faith and life of the church must stand in continuity with their enduring witness. This continuity is ensured not by some physical continuity through the sacramental laying on of hands, but by our faithfulness to and reaffirmation of the gospel they gave witness to in the writings of the New Testament. As Jürgen Moltmann puts it: "The apostolic succession is in fact and

actually mean for us today. One of the things postmodern hermeneutics has made us aware of is there is no such thing as an uninterpreted word or act. There are two issues this raises in relation to our engagement with emerging church. Being faithful to the apostolic witness is not just mere repetition of those words, or repeating the way in which they might have been interpreted as being appropriate to another place and another time. The apostolic word must be interpreted anew for every generation and every context. The emerging church is to be commended for its willing-

ness, by and large, to take scripture seriously, and to seek to interpret afresh what it might mean for us today in our particular context, rather than just repeat unthinkingly the formulas and answers of the past.

But secondly, how do we know that new appropriation or interpretation is faithful to the witness of the apostles? Calvin argued that interpretation of scripture must take place within the hermeneutical community

of the church. Too often in protestant and evangelical circles the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has been understood within the culture of enlightenment individualism, to mean the right of every individual to interpret Scripture for themselves, a tendency heightened in the radical individualism of late modernity. So much so that Kevin van Hoozer asks in his hermeneutical tour de force, *Is there a meaning in this text?*<sup>22</sup> or is there in fact

just a never ending possibility of meanings. Listening to the voice of the church, the hermeneutical community, is one of the significant factors to take account of in discovering what this text means for us today. And by the church we mean the "one, holy, catholic, apostolic church", the church throughout time historically and throughout the world geographically. This means giving due, but not stifling, weight to the voice of tradition. G.K. Chesterton wrote: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes – our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking around."<sup>23</sup> With its ditching of

traditional church, its giving up on traditions that might have developed and been passed on for centuries, apart from occasionally ransacking them and tearing out of any meaningful context some token that seems cute in the eclecticism of postmodern

culture, the emerging church runs the risk of missing the wisdom that has developed over the centuries, of listening to the caution that might come from previous misinterpretations, and thus in the end run outside the boundaries of where the Spirit might be willing to venture with them. Sadly this is a pattern that has happened all too often in the history of well intentioned new movements. There is a use of scripture which is false teaching. There is heresy that is full of proof texts. Less dramatically there are also representations of the gospel that are unbalanced and therefore unhelpful,

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***"There is a use of scripture which is false teaching. There is heresy that is full of proof texts."***

and maintaining conversation and community with the whole church so interpretation occurs within the checks and balances of that will help ensure an ongoing yet presently meaningful faithfulness to the gospel within the emerging movement.

#### **Word and sacraments**

Two further marks of the church have also been identified, particularly among Protestants. As Calvin put it, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."<sup>24</sup> Holding this definition central to its reformed understanding of the church, the Presbyterian Church ordains those who complete the formational requirements as ministers of word and sacrament, so that it will

have communities of believers where the "Word of God is purely preached" and as other definitions put it "the sacraments are rightly administered". The former is in some ways easier to assess than the latter. What does it mean to ensure the sacraments are rightly administered? Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas argued it is the presence of the bishop that makes it so. Obviously a problematic definition for many churches. For Catholics and Anglicans it is someone rightly appointed by the bishop who ensures it is in faithful continuity with the apostolic tradition. We have argued here that being apostolic means faithfulness to the witness of the apostles as contained in the New Testament. Hence, for

Calvin, "as instituted by Christ". Here is why the Reformed tradition has held word and sacrament together, because it is not just receiving the bread and the wine but doing so in the context of hearing the gospel story of what they mean that makes them a sacrament, a means of grace. So a theologically informed and properly recognised ministry is important to ensure that the church remains apostolic, faithful to the scriptures, in all aspects of its life, including the preaching and sacraments.

Parts of emerging church, as well as other experimental forms of church life, have often been critical of and resistant to theological training, often preferring to have leaders and pastors who are more entrepreneurial and creative. Too much theology kills that. Many churches in New Zealand have followed this

by appointing individuals as ministers who have no theological training but show good entrepreneurial and management skills. I have to say that at times I have been in churches and listened to sermons or seen communion or baptisms, that at best have not been faithful to the Scriptures and at times, dare I say today, even heretical. An entertaining event but scarcely a sacrament. Sometimes word and sacrament are missing completely. Which of course raises the question, is it church?

A central reformation principle is *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, "the church reformed is always being reformed".

This phrase is often quoted by those who want to change and reform and do church in different ways. Are we being true to our tradition in doing this? In some senses yes, but it is a misunderstanding of the reformers' intent to see it as giving "carte blanche" to try whatever we want. The reformers reformed the church in the light of the Scriptures. Luther did not just say "Here I stand I can do no other", but "My conscience is bound to the word of God, here I stand...". It is why ministers were teaching elders, and now ministers of word and sacrament, so that by placing the role of scripture central in life of the church and office of ministry the church will be continually reformed in the light of scripture. As the Church of Scotland statement on ministry in 2000 puts it, they are "to represent Christ in the faithful proclaiming of the Word and right administration of the Sacraments and so ensure the possibility of such reform and renewal."<sup>25</sup> The emerging church movement would do well to seek to ensure a theologically formed leadership so that it too will experience the renewing presence of Christ that comes from faithful preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments.

### A sociological insight

I want to finish by drawing from a sociological insight, a discipline I believe is a very helpful conversation partner for theology. Many of the grand theories of the earlier sociologists are now viewed with much suspicion, particularly the grand modern metanarrative of secularisation.<sup>26</sup> However there is one theory which I believe continues to provide invaluable insight: Max Weber's theory of the routinisation of charisma.<sup>27</sup> He argues that what happens in the evolution of religion is

that a new group gathers around a charismatic leader and is a dynamic, free, loose charismatic movement. Over time it rationalises, routinises and systematises its life and so loses its charisma. Some people become frustrated with this and break away around the edges to form a new charismatic group with new energy

and dynamism. It is this that ensures the ongoing renewal of the religion.

Looking at the history of Christianity in the West there is much that can be helpfully explained by Weber. There is no question that much of church life in the West has become routinised and rationalised, there is little

dynamism and charisma. The Spirit has been routinised out. I believe the emerging church movement can be understood in these terms, as can the charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s. What has happened often in the past is that the established religious institution de-churches the new movement and the action is reciprocated by the movement. My hope is that in this instance we can avoid repeating history and that by remaining in communion and continuing in conversation, the emerging church may be part of the movement for renewal and reformation of the church in the West, and that the emerging church movement may gain from

the wisdom and catholicity of the church to grow into a more faithful and dynamic communion of the triune God in our challenging western context.

### So... when is a church a church?

When is a church a church? I would probably in the end agree with Miroslav Volf's conclusion, that "where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, not only is Christ

present among them, but a Christian church is there as well, perhaps a bad church, a church that may well transgress against love and truth, but a church nonetheless."<sup>28</sup> Many in the emerging movement prefer to talk about the emerging conversation rather than the emerging church. My plea would be for those within the movement to include in the conversation all of those who with them are members of the "one holy catholic apostolic church", so they might come to more adequately share those marks. And to those who are sure they are members of that church, but are suspicious as to whether these new comers qualify, to reach out in conversation with the emerging church movement and so help us all to more fully demonstrate the transform-

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ing presence of the risen Christ in our life together.

### Endnotes

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