



*As the Church struggles to face the future in a rapidly changing world, it must ask basic questions about its relevance in relating the Gospel to contemporary culture. Will it be further marginalized as an ancient relic, swamped by the obsessions of the market place? Or will it discover a new and lasting identity, fresh confidence for mission, and creative ways of being in dialogue with the fast-changing landscape of post-modern society? In this article, which is adapted from a Gospel & Culture workshop, Colin Greene examines our received models of being Church and explores some of the issues which will determine its future for the third millennium.*

# What Sort of Story – What Sort of Church?

by *Colin Greene*

One of the greatest difficulties the Church faces as it seeks renewal and a new future is a loss of confidence in its own self identity. This is often because our existing ways of being Church are collapsing, and we are losing the structures which previously undergirded the Church's engagement with its cultural context. My starting point, therefore, is to look at three models which historically have enabled the Church to relocate its self-identity and redefine its relationship with the prevailing culture.

## The Apostolic Model (Acts 1.8)

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost produced the communitarian fellowships of Jerusalem. The book of Acts makes it clear that the missionary expansion of the Church is still an unfinished agenda. This model has four primary characteristics.

**1 Koinonia.** Churches were intensely loyal and committed groups of believers, who shared their corporate life at a variety of levels (Acts 2.42-47). They understood themselves to be the ecclesia, the community who lived by reliving the stories and

teachings of Jesus. They were, in the words of one contemporary theologian, "a discipleship of equals". The new convert was established in the apostolic faith of the community through a rigorous process of initiation and teaching.

**2 Diaconia.** Responsibility and service were the hallmarks of such churches. The responsibility to maintain unity in the face of discord was coupled with a willingness to seek the anointing of the Spirit who would equip the saints for works of service and building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4.11-13).

**3 Diaspora.** The Church did not stagnate or become over satisfied on a diet of self-congratulating worship and introverted fellowship. Instead churches spawned other fellowships, and were propelled out into uncharted territory. This happened under the impulse of the Spirit, and in the face of sporadic cycles of intense persecution which prevented any roots being established too deeply (Acts 8).

**4 Martyria.** This is, of course, the Greek word from which we derive the English word "martyrdom". It defined the relationship the apostolic communities had with their cultural environment. The Church

witnessed to a crucified and risen Christ in a culture which was perceived as enemy territory. The culture was hostile and antagonistic to the new Christian faith not least because the Church refused to swear political allegiance to the Roman Empire. To preach Christ as Lord was regarded as political sedition. Therefore some Christians endured the same fate as their leader and were crucified as birthday presents for the emperor whom they had defied by locating ultimate authority in the person of Jesus the Christ.

## Does it ring true?

It is this last characteristic of the apostolic model which is often conveniently forgotten by those who are trying to resurrect it as the one which most fits our contemporary situation. The culture we inhabit may not be gospel-friendly, it may have abandoned its origins in the Judeo-Christian faith long ago, but this is not a culture which imprisons and crucifies believers. The relationship between church and contemporary culture cannot be reduced to a simplistic model of believer versus antagonistic persecutor.

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That is why all the combative imagery of taking enemy territory, overthrowing the powers and principalities, and binding the territorial spirits, just doesn't ring true. The reality of spiritual warfare in terms of an ever present vigilance in the face of systemic evil should not be trivialized by resorting to such language to define the Church's relationship with its cultural context. There is a much more sophisticated interface between Church and culture than the battle imagery allows. There are some who are antagonistic, others who are genuinely interested, many who are indifferent, and many more who remain to be convinced.

### The Christendom Model

The vestiges of this model which replaced the apostolic one, in the era between the first few centuries and the religious wars which tore Europe apart at the end of the 16th century, are still with us. For, if the apostolic model defined the Church's relationship to culture in terms of hostile opposition, the Christendom model replaced it with peaceful co-existence. It dramatically altered the central, defining characteristics of Church:

*1 Koinonia.* Small, committed and essentially egalitarian communities of believers were replaced by an expanding network of parish boundaries. Here, the Church sought to define its relationship to the host culture in terms of territorial responsibility. Previously, few people were Christian; now, in theory, everyone is. Mutual interdependence was replaced by anonymity and nominality. The discipleship of equals increasingly became hierarchy. The teaching and initiation of converts was replaced by rites of passage for every citizen.

*2 Diaconia.* This was translated into the belief that it was the responsibility of all to be good citizens of the empire, to conform to its laws and uphold its cherished traditions. The charismatic dimensions of ministry and service were replaced by professional clerics. The active engagement of the laity was replaced by passivity.

*3 Diaspora.* Due to the absence of persecution, there was no longer any need for the flexible response mechanisms of the early Church. Gone were the communities of sojourners and "resident aliens", replaced instead by organized religion.

*4 Martyria.* The notion that all were witnesses with allegiance to one overlord was supplanted by the notion of citizenship, because there was no longer any need for mission. The greatest loss of the Christendom model was the erosion of any missionary interface with culture at all, so the Church became indistinguishable from its cultural landscape:

**It moved from being a small, persecuted minority to being a large and influential organization; it changed from harassed sect to oppressor of sects; every link between Christianity and Judaism was severed: an intimate relationship between throne and altar evolved; membership of the Church became a matter of course; the office of the believer was largely forgotten; the dogma was conclusively fixed and finalized; the Church had adjusted to the long postponement of Christ's return; the apocalyptic missionary movement of the primitive Church gave way to the expansion of Christendom.**

*(Transforming Mission by David Bosch)*

### The Pluralist Model

If the apostolic model was "Church against culture", and the Christendom model was "Church married to culture", then the pluralist model was the capitulation of the Church to culture. One of the consequences of the Enlightenment was that Church and State were overtaken by other forces which effectively demanded a new relationship between the two. The peaceful concord between empire and Christianity was shattered by the Reformation and the religious wars which followed in its wake. It now became the business of the state or the ruling monarch to decide which religious confession would hold sway for the majority of its subjects, be that Reformed, Anglican or Roman Catholic.

Pluralism in religious belief produced an important intellectual development. If Europe could tear itself apart in the name of religion, was this because the Christian faith was not based on divinely inspired doctrines after all, but was a human invention which obscured rather than illuminated what it meant to be human? So emerged the faith of secular humanism with its fundamental affirmation of the omniscience of human reason, the right of self-determination and the belief in historical progress. All of which brought about the displacement of the Christian faith from the public sphere, and the marginalisation of the Christian church into the custodians of a privatized religion.

In reality, the pluralist option was the attempt by some forms of Protestantism to reinvent the apostolic model. The Church was to be understood largely as the community of the faithful which sought refuge from a largely hostile environment. For others, notably Liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics, it was simply the extension of the Christendom model into a new cultural context. The Church was still for the people of the nation, be they believers or the cultured despisers of religion.

What we have inherited is bits and pieces of both the apostolic and Christendom models put through the reductionist grinder of the pluralist option. Pick and mix religion was not invented by the New Age, it has been around for at least 200 years, as the diversity and multifarious options of the pluralist model has formed itself into a veritable consumer bonanza. The Church has, consequently, struggled to adequately redefine its relationship with the culture of scientific and technological humanism. Wilbert Shenk graphically describes the contemporary malaise that effects us all:

*Renewal will not be realised by modulating dissonances between culture and church. And neither can it be achieved by urging the restoration of the original New Testament pattern or by appealing for the reinvigoration of tradition regardless of how noble a particular variety may have been. New structures, appreciation of culture, the*



*original New Testament pattern of the church, and respect for ecclesiastical traditions are all important. But none of these options offers an adequate basis for revitalizing the church that now subsists in the lengthened shadow of Christendom.*

So what are the characteristics of the Church which is still tied to some, if not all, of these previous models of cultural engagement? They are threefold and they all produce a great sense of cultural dissonance.

### The Problem of Credibility – The Apostolic Model

The main problem with the apostolic model is that, the more the Church perceives its fundamental relationship with contemporary culture in terms of antagonistic and hostile opposition, the more it withdraws into its own cultural ghetto. The marginalisation of the Christian churches, and the complete inability to engage creatively with the presuppositions and values that undergird contemporary culture, has been gathering pace ever since the state took over from the Church as the custodian of public life. We cannot delude ourselves that becoming a Christian is also the process whereby we divest ourselves of our cultural skin. There is always a tension, sometimes creative, sometimes destructive, between our Christian faith and the values of contemporary culture. How we handle that tension is often the fulcrum around which the missionary engagement with contemporary culture is formed.

Despite the impressive church growth of some evangelical and charismatic churches, there are an increasing number of Christians who now see themselves as post-evangelical or post-church because they cannot sign-on any longer to the kind of religious schizophrenia that masquerades under the title of “Bible-believing Christian”. That is because many of our churches offer neither an appropriate spirituality, nor a credible practical theology to sustain them in their daily encounters with contempo-

rary culture. As Robin Gamble identified in the last edition of *The Bible in TransMission*, it is “Generation X” (the present generation of young people) who have by and large deserted the churches, who are most disenfranchised in this regard. Some find their way into experimental or alternative worship churches, but most simply opt out of what is, for them, no longer a credible form of Christian discipleship.

### The Problem of Accessibility – The Christendom Model

There are other reasons why “Generation X” continue to absent themselves from the churches and other forms of organized religion, and are involved instead in Buddhist meditation groups and New Age “D.I.Y religion”. They view the Church as hierarchical, patriarchal and hopelessly traditional. By and large, young people today prefer to be egalitarian rather than hierarchical, gender inclusive rather than patriarchal, and informal and flexible rather than traditional. The marriage between Church and state, upon which the Christendom model was founded, transformed the Church into being the custodian of the values and aspirations of the empire. But the divorce between both parties, brought about by the Enlightenment, leaves any church which still adopts this model looking hopelessly out of date, an inaccessible relic of a bygone age.

### The Problem of Plausibility – The Pluralist Model

Increasingly, in the midst of a culture that has worshipped at the shrine of pluralism, a Church which merely apes the spirit of the age looks increasingly implausible. A pluralist society tolerates one and all – as long as none of the players puts forward an exclusive claim for truth. How can the Church venture into the public arena when its diagnosis and prognosis of the state of society is viewed as nothing more than the babbling of the chattering classes? How can the Church endeavor to speak

with one voice if evangelicals, charismatics, liberals and fundamentalists all have their own particular brand of the truth – and one which seems equally unpalatable and implausible to those listening from the outside?

The sociologist, Peter Berger, referred to the fact that each culture creates its own plausibility structures through which it tries to make sense of the world. Take, for instance, the debate about human sexuality. Of course it is a vexed and difficult subject, but if the Church adopts a sloganist position which simplifies the issues and pillories those who think otherwise, then we begin to look hopelessly implausible to those, who from the vantage point of their own sexual orientation, have agonized over the issues for a long time.

If genuine ecumenism means anything, it surely means helping the Church to speak what it believes to be the truth in a sensitive and compassionate manner to those who may still beg to differ.

### The Post Modern Model – The Shape of Things to Come

What will the Church look like in the 21st century? That we are in a state of profound cultural crisis, few would deny. This situation has led some people to adopt the “Church in Exile” model as an appropriate way to conceive of the relationship between the Church and post-modernity. For example, Raymond Fung, the former Evangelism Secretary for the World Council of Churches, suggested that the present relationship between the Church and culture is rather like the parable of the prodigal son. Modern culture is dissipating its energies and using up its spiritual and moral reserves in a capitalistic revel of monstrous proportions. The Church, like the Father, just has to wait until an economically bankrupt, morally chastened and spiritually exhausted modern culture once again returns to the fold of Mother Church. To some, that is just so much wishful thinking.

If we use Jesus’ description of discipleship as like being salt



or light, then we find a model best described in terms of the critical interaction of Church and culture. That interaction is not determined, however, by the world setting the agenda but by the very nature of the message the church proclaims and the self-identity of the Church as the primary witness to the crucified and risen Christ. The gospel is the reality and hope of the coming reign of God and the Church is the living embodiment of that hope and promise which is ultimately aimed at the healing of the nations.

What then would be the contours of such a critical interaction between Church and contemporary postmodern culture? Here are a few suggestions.

### The Return of the Church to the Public Domain

The Church must once again discover what it means to speak prophetically and profoundly in the public domain. The judgment of modernity upon the Church is that it is best understood as a privatized utility dispensing a franchised commodity called religion. Many contemporary cultural analysts regard that commodity as capable of being packaged and dispensed to satisfy a variety of tastes and personal preferences. It can be raves in the nave for the young and trendy, charismatic sweet-talking with Jesus for the hurt and self-indulgent, austere ritualism for the aloof and conservative, evangelical biblicism for the out of sorts moralizers and complainers, self-help meditation for the introverted and confused, syncretistic mysticism for the effete and intelligentsia, and radical social action for the disillusioned and disenchanting.

All of which may be of interest to those in the club, but it cuts no ice with those whose business it is to determine what goes on in the public square. The proclamation of the universal reign of God, as David Bosch has indicated, transforms mission into social and political ethics or what is sometimes called the construction of an appropriate public theology. Walter Brueggemann makes fundamentally the same point when

he notes that the kingdom of God is the core metaphor for the creation of a new social imagination. In practical terms this is to make clear that the gospel is fundamentally concerned with all that leads to the flourishing of human life and is diametrically opposed to all that leads to the distortion and diminishment of human life. That can only mean that the Church in each community represents those who are there to work for the shalom of that community. In that sense, there is no distinction between the clergy and the laity; instead all are public servants committed to policies and programmes that bring about reconciliation, justice, liberation and so contribute at least to the common good.

### The Recovery of the Bible as Scripture

If modernity has successfully marginalised the Church, it has also effectively closed the Bible. Recent Bible Society research shows that 17% of regular churchgoers had never read anything in the Bible for themselves. This is symptomatic of a deeper malaise.

The Bible, understood as Scripture and not just an amalgam of different genres of literature, is the remembering and retelling of the central drama of the Judeo-Christian faith. It is the story of God's persevering love for and interaction with the creation. That story, along with the values and attitudes it inculcates in us, is neither open to public scrutiny, nor part of the public debate about the kind of society we wish to endorse or create. The Bible is closed both in the Church and society.

One reason for this is the dominance of historical-critical methods as the only reliable means of assessing the original meaning and intent of Scripture. While this has brought immense benefits and rewards in terms of our appreciation of the historical and cultural background to Scripture, it has also created two undesirable effects. One is that the Bible has increasingly become the scholars' book. It is now a small coterie of the academic élite who are supposed to

hold the key to the real meaning and significance of Scripture. Witness for instance the media interest and hype surrounding those involved in the controversial Jesus Seminar in the U.S.A. Another is that the analyzing and dissecting of the Bible into its respective components, valuable and important as this is, has tended to lead to a situation where we have lost the overall plot. The "big picture", the metanarrative of Scripture is withdrawn from view, and the overall intention of the Bible, understood as Scripture, which is to introduce us to the central events and characters of the story is again subverted.

This situation has also contributed to the demise of preaching as a means of communicating the relevance and importance of Scripture to issues of public concern. As Susan White has identified elsewhere in this edition of *The Bible in TransMission*, preaching has ceased to be valued both inside and outside the Church. This suggests that Christians are left without the gift of prophetic imagination whereby we are able to relate Christian faith to the social, cultural and political circumstances that pertain in our society. There is no longer any point in claiming the authority of Scripture as if that in itself was capable of convincing the general public. That authority, credibility and relevance will only be demonstrated in the critical interaction that takes place between those who convincingly apply its insights and wisdom to the problems and issues which dominate our public life.

A final reason is simply the difficulties people brought up in a non-book culture experience in terms of reading and understanding an ancient text. Increasingly, people struggle with issues to do with textuality, interpretation and application to the world as we know it.

How then can we recover the Bible as Scripture? One way is to simply indwell the story ourselves. To see ourselves as part of the continuing drama and to be related to the central aspects of the overall plot. In that way, as Tom Wright makes clear, when we open the book in the public domain, we are not ren-



dered speechless or dumb in the face of complex and apparently insoluble issues.

## The Re-enchantment of the World

One of the great challenges of modernity was to make the world of nature and creation accessible to us by the use of reason alone, untrammelled by reference to extraneous authorities like tradition and the Church. It was this new-found confidence in the power of human reason which led to what Jurgen Moltmann calls "the scientific and technological project of the modern world". We are presently scrutinizing the galaxies with the help of the Hubble telescope for evidence of black holes; and in genetics we may soon have the capability to clone another human being. In the process, however, we have created a situation which the sociologists refer to as the "disenchantment of the modern world".

We have reduced the world to a place governed by impersonal and apparently inviolable scientific laws; we have changed our hinterland into a mess of sprawling cities and urban decay; we have eliminated species after species of animal and plant life; we have created ecological no-go areas and left a huge legacy of nuclear waste for future generations to cope with. In the process we have dislocated ourselves from the world of nature, we have lost our sense of being at home in the world and our capacity to wonder. We have created the phenomena of the homeless mind, a profound sense of alienation and anomie.

In seeking to dethrone science from its place of power and control, some of the advocates of postmodernity are simply revelling in irrationality, while others are seeking a re-enchantment of the world. With this latter group we can join forces as we once again declare to the homeless strangers of the modern era that we "stand under a firmament of truth and greatness" (Polanyi), or that the heavens declare the greatness of God (Psalm 19). The world is not a place of emptiness where all we can do is inoculate ourselves

against the prevailing culture of despair, but is full of the mysteries of faith and purposes of God. It is those mysteries of faith that we celebrate in Christian worship – a vision of wholeness, a liturgical re-enactment of the whole council of God. The renewal of the creative energy and symbolic power of Christian worship should not be simply based on the need for liturgical innovation, or the desire to accommodate different tastes. It should be the arena where faith is renewed, our love of God and each other refocused, and the world re-enchanted. Otherwise we will be left isolated and alienated in the type of world described by Michael Polanyi:

*Law is no more than what the courts will decide, art but the emollient of nerves, morality but a convention, tradition but an inertia, God but a psychological necessity. Then man dominates a world in which he himself does not exist. For with his obligations he has lost his voice and his hope, and has been left behind meaningless to himself.<sup>1</sup>*

## The Reinvention of the Human Person

Postmodernism is sometimes referred to as the post-ideological age. It is the period of recent history which has witnessed not just the decline of organized religion but the decline of the Grand Ideologies: national socialism, fascism, Marxism, totalitarian communism. They established themselves as counter religions which upheld a particular view of human nature and our relation to the world. For Marx, liberation was freedom from economic alienation brought about by social revolution. The apparent failure of Marxism also undermines the philosophical cogency of its attempt to redefine the nature of the human person. Again, as D. Bosch has indicated, the Grand Ideologies have now been replaced by "soft ideologies" such as the free market, the American way of life or New Age utopianism.

For many in contemporary culture, even after two hundred years of secular humanism, it is not at all obvious what it

means to celebrate our common humanity. If the Church is to address this conundrum, we must be clear that our churches are not primarily hospitals for the spiritually insane or sanctuaries for the emotionally disturbed or refuges for the battered and bruised, but centres of pilgrimage and exploration whereby we seek to discover what it means to be a human being.

As Robert Warren has noted:

*What we are called to do, tell and serve others in their search for our lost humanity, is also what we are called to be, those who enjoy and affirm one another in the community of faith as together we make exodus from false values into the wholeness of life made possible in Christ.<sup>2</sup>*

There have been many attempts from the advocates of modernity to redefine the nature of the human person. Some of the devotees of modern science have declared that we are the chance product of an evolutionary cocktail which has produced a rather sophisticated animal, driven by the same selfish gene, and therefore likely to create misery unless checked by the powers of the state and the judiciary. The psychoanalysts on the other hand claim that we are terrorized by dark subterranean forces located in the human psyche which create all sorts of false and unrealizable expectations. The biologists are suggesting that the more we unravel the DNA code, the more we find that we are simply determined by the coded information we inherited from our family tree. Consequently moral categories such as freedom, justice and responsibility are an illusion.

The Christian faith says that we are made in the image of our creator but have been fractured and disorientated from our true purpose by the powers of sin and evil which also reside in this world, but from which we can be healed and liberated through faith in Jesus Christ. Of course this involves great personal struggle and commitment to the cause of social justice as was true for Jesus, nevertheless it was for that reason he came amongst us, lived and died so that he could reveal to us the

nature of true humanity, and so remake and fashion us in his own image. The good news of the gospel is that the reinvention of the human person is an eschatological reality, it is both here and not yet, however it is in the community of the Church where it can be anticipated and discovered.

The reorientation of our churches into the sort of pilgrimage communities which can function in this kind of way will not happen overnight. In fact the reverse is likely to be the case. One overhears much talk in some sections of the Church about the need for and impending probability of revival. A brief study of church history and an honest appraisal of one's own spiritual journey reveals that revivals are usually preceded by the wilderness experience. It is in the desert that we face our own vulnerability, isolation and despair. It is the transforming reality of this dislocation of ourselves and our churches from the prevailing models of success and the triumphalism of easy-believism which will give us the courage and prophetic insight to face the future with hope and integrity. It is just such a situation which a contemporary prophet in our midst so skilfully recognizes.

*The Churches in Britain on the whole are not marginal, not poor, not desperate. They hold a very privileged position, their voices are heard (though there is a selective deafness). But this situation is probably ending, and Churches are likely to become more marginal. They will need to earn the right to be heard by the intrinsic sense of what they say, and by their own integrity and credibility. This could be the salvation of the Churches, but we will need to develop new and far stronger forms of solidarity and sustenance. We are probably entering a new desert period, a dark time, in which our own ability to cope with despair and desolation will be tested and purified.*<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* by Michael Polanyi.

<sup>2</sup> *Building Missionary Congregations* by Robert Warren.

<sup>3</sup> *The Sky is Red: Discerning the signs of the times* by Kenneth Leech.