

EXTRACTS AND THOUGHTS FROM *THE SHAPING OF THINGS TO COME*
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IT IS TIME THE WESTERN CHURCH “GOT OVER” CHRISTENDOM

Christendom is the name given to the sacral culture that has dominated European society from around the eleventh century until the end of the twentieth. Its sources go back to the time when Constantine came to the throne of the Roman Empire and granted Christians complete freedom of worship and even favoured Christianity, thereby undermining all other religions in the empire. In virtually an instant Christianity moved from being a marginalized, subversive and persecuted movement secretly gathering in houses and catacombs, to being the favoured religion in empire. Everything changed!

By the Middle Ages the church-state symbiosis was formalized into an institutional interdependence between the Pope and what was then called the Holy Roman Empire, effectively Western Europe today. Church and state became the pillars of the sacral culture, each supporting the other. Christendom had by this stage developed its own distinct identity, one that provided the matrix for the understanding of both church and state. It had effectively become *the* metanarrative for an entire epoch. A metanarrative is an overarching story that claims to contain truth applicable to all people at all times in all cultures. And while the Christendom story no longer defines Western culture, it still remains the primary definer of the church's self-understanding in almost every Western nation.

Society, at least in its overtly non-Christian manifestation, is “over” Christendom. But this is not the case within the Western church itself. Christendom, as a paradigm of understanding, as a metanarrative, still exercises an overweening influence on our existing theological, missiological and ecclesiological understandings in church circles. In other words, we still think of the church and its mission in terms of Christendom. While, in reality, we are in a post-Christendom context, the Western church still operates for the most part in a Christendom mode.

Christendom in its essence is a certain stance in relation to its context, a mode of engagement, and a way of thinking about the church. Given its privileged status at the centre of culture, its view of mission is fundamentally distorted. What's more it has a very fixed, very *concrete*, notion of the church – one normally associated with (distinctly designed) buildings, liturgies, denominational templates, and clergy. Its missional mode is primarily attractional/extractional rather than sending or incarnational. Its type of leadership can generally be described as priestly, sometimes prophetic to insiders but almost never to outsiders (no one “out there” is listening), and rarely apostolic. Christendom has moved Christianity into a maintenance mode.

In his classic 1975 book, *The Problem of Wineskins*, Howard Snyder writes that church buildings attest to five facts about the Western church, its immobility, inflexibility, lack of fellowship, pride and class divisions. “The gospel says ‘Go’, but our church building say, ‘Stay’. The gospel says, ‘Seek the lost’, but our churches say, ‘Let the lost seek the church.’” The medium is the message. And, more than that, once a building is erected, the church programme and budget are largely determined by it.

As we stand here at the roots of the 21st century, we believe that we must, at long last, give up trying to rejig the paradigm to suit the massively changed missional contexts of the Western church. *It simply has not worked.* In fact, in the increasingly complex situations in which we now find ourselves, it has likely created more problems than it has solved.. The church is in decline in almost every context in the First World. In this situation naïve applications of traditionalist paradigms create problems, they don't resolve them. It's time to move on and find a new mode of understanding and engagement with surrounding contexts. We can no longer afford our historical sentimentality, even addiction, to the past. Christendom is *not* the biblical mode of the church. In enshrining it as the sole form of the church, we have made it into an idol that has captivated our imaginations and enslaved us to a historical-cultural expression of the church. We have not answered the challenges of our time precisely because we refuse to let go of the idol. This must change!

The Christendom-mode church has three flaws in its DNA – it is attractional, dualistic and hierarchical. First, by attractional we mean that the traditional church plants itself within a particular community, neighbourhood or locale and expects that people will come to it to meet God and find fellowship with others. By anticipating that if they get their internal features right, people will flock to the services, the church betrays its belief in attractionalism. If we get our seating, our parking, our children's programme, our preaching and our music right, they will come. This assumes that we have a place in our society and that people don't join our churches because, though they want to be Christians, they are unhappy with the product. The missional church recognises that it does not hold a place of honour in its host community and that its missional imperative compels it to move out from itself into the host community as salt and light. The "come-to-us" stance developed over the Christendom period is unbiblical. Jesus, Paul, the disciples, the early church leaders all had a "go-to-them" mentality.

Secondly, the Christendom-mode church is dualistic. It separates the sacred from the profane, the holy from the unholy, the in from the out. Some of the critical results are:

- Few of us know how to apply our belief to our work.
- We only make minimal connections between our faith and our spare-time activities.
- We have little sense of a Christian approach to regular activities like domestic chores.
- Our everyday attitudes are significantly shaped by the dominant values of our society.
- Many of our spiritual difficulties stem from the daily pressure we experience.
- Our everyday concerns receive little attention in church.
- When addressed, everyday issues tend to be approached too theoretically.

Third, the traditional church (Christendom) is hierarchical, deeply indebted to what we see as an overly religious, bureaucratic, top-down model of leadership, as opposed to one that is more structures around grass-roots agendas. For how much longer can the church ignore Paul's radical dissolution of the traditional distinction between priests and laity, between officials and ordinary members, between holy men and common people? In the emerging global cultural context the hierarchical model has little to say to a generation that values egalitarianism and community.

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

The missional church is the hope of the post-Christendom era. So, what will the the future shape of the church look like? If it takes the form we propose for the missional church, it will look vastly varied in its many different contexts. But we can be sure that there will be some common values across the board. It will place a high value on communal life, more open leadership structures, and the contribution of all the people of God. It will be radical in its attempts to embrace biblical mandates for the life of locally-based faith communities. We believe the missional church will be adventurous, playful and surprising. It will gather for sensual-experiential-participatory worship and be deeply concerned for matters of justice-seeking and mercy-bringing. It will strive for a type of unity-in-diversity as it celebrates individual differences and values uniqueness, while also placing a high premium on community. It will focus on the journey of faith and the experience of God. It will desire less structure and more direct involvement by participants. It will foster a sense of flexibility and a distinctly non-hierarchical culture. It will recognise that the experience of church is about the sustaining of discipleship.

It is important to distinguish between centred sets and bounded sets, for this goes to the heart of the difference between the two modes of church we have been discussing. The attractional church is a bounded set. That is, it is a group of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. The mission-incarnational church, though, is a centred set. This means that, rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centred set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the centre.

What are the non-reducible features of church?

- Do you need to meet in a church building? Not necessarily.
- Do you need to meet weekly? Not necessarily. The first Christians met every day. A church can meet as often as it needs.
- Do you need a minister? Not necessarily. The New Testament is clear on the need for accountability, admonishment and learning. It does speak about leaders (elders) exercising humble and loving care for a community. But you don't need an ordained minister for that.
- Do you need to sing hymns? Not necessarily. There is mention in the New Testament of the value of singing spiritual songs. But if the goal is that worship and learning occur when you meet, you can use as few (none?) or as many songs as you need.
- Does someone have to bring a sermon? Not necessarily. As long as people have an opportunity to hear from God, through his Word and other means, it doesn't matter if one person speaks for thirty minutes, or thirty people contribute a minute each. Learning, worship and the opportunity for God's Word are essential. How they play out is entirely open to experimentation.

Ask yourself, "If we could start church all over again from scratch, would we do it the way it's currently being done?" Then ask yourself, "What is essential for church to remain and what is optional?"

It is our belief that the skewed ascetic perspective of Christendom, fuelled as it is by Greek thought forms and dualism that separates matter and spirit, has deeply alienated the average person from Christianity by failing to help integrate one's body and associated physical life into the spiritual experience of God.. It highlights the need to recover a redemptive framework for pleasure *as a missional asset*. Can people meet with God in and through their experience of, and love of, life itself? To this question we want to say a wholehearted yes! In fact, if the church fails to actively construct this bridge, it will fail to have any real impact in the postmodern world that we inhabit. The materials for this missional bridge-building exercise can be found in the Hebrew tradition with its affirmation of life in all its manifestations.

APOSTOLIC LEADERSHIP

In this chapter we want to explore one of the most significant aspects needed for the transition from Christendom mode to a missional mode of church – a shift to apostolic leadership. In fact, without this, the missional church is unlikely to rise at all, and if it does manage to survive birth, it will not last long because it will lack the leadership structure to sustain it over the long distance. We argue that the development of a new kind of leadership is probably the single most important question of strategy in this decade, and whether the church responds correctly or not will determine to some extent its survival as a viable expression of the gospel in the years to come. The crucial passage in this regard is Ephesians 4:1-16.

We are convinced of the critical importance of the rediscovery of all of the five ministry functions mentioned in this text. These verses seem to underscore the fact that the church's ministry is fundamentally charismatic by nature. This is important to recognise because it allows us to move away from seeing these five ministries as *office* to that of *function*. What we are arguing for here is a rediscovery of the fullness of the Pauline teaching about Christian ministry. The Pauline logic that asserts the church is gathered around *one Lord/faith/baptism* is the same logic that God has specifically and deliberately placed this pattern of ministry/gifting in the church. We therefore claim that this text is grammatically, theologically, and thematically indivisible. The church and its fundamental ministry are one.

Paul was not primarily describing, as is often assumed, the official leadership of the church in this text, but rather the church itself. Paul didn't labour under any misconceptions of ordained ministry that is so much part of Christendom's assumptions of "the ministry". There are no clergy and no laity in the New Testament – all are ministers. And so Paul here described everyone in the church in some way. In other words, if we had some way to analyse the gift-typing of the entire church all would in some way fit into the five-fold nature of the church's ministry. This aspect alone, if accepted and practiced, would unleash significant renewal in church life as people connect with the primary giftings. This is not to say that we are discarding Paul's instructions for elders (or leaders) within the church. We see the leadership matrix as the community within the community, made up of certain people who are called to exemplify and embody these ministries and to foster their wider growth.

WE bemoan the current preference in churches for pastors (shepherds) and teachers at the exclusion of apostles, prophets and evangelists. In fact, such a bias is a perversion of the Pauline idea. We repudiate the classic hierarchical, triangular model with so-called senior pastors at the top.

We began by indicating that a missional-apostolic church will only flourish under this five-fold leadership. Again we have to emphasise that it will take the emergence of the pioneering- missional type of leader to accomplish this. Sadly, the Western church simply

does not have enough of the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic leadership types at present to get the job of mission done.

One of the great weapons in the revolutionary leader's arsenal is to cultivate a sense of *holy* dissatisfaction – to provoke a basic discontent with *what is* and to awaken a desire to move towards *what could be*. The real revolutionary is the person who has nothing left to lose. Another invaluable tool for the reconceptualising of the mission and ministry of the church is the art of subversive questioning. Questions are subversive because they force the hearer to self-awareness and a personal search for answers. Ministers are often expected to be answer people rather than the more effective (and Christlike) question people.. Another great way to evoke the creative juices is to learn to think like a beginner, not like an expert.

We would like to commend risk-taking as a stimulus for creative reimagining. Imagination and creativity are dangerous, but we believe that without risk there can be no growth and no progress. If you want to bring about and nurture a truly missional-apostolic church, then put yourself and your organization *at risk* because without it you will be neither missional nor apostolic. Simply stated, when you are out of your depth the creative juices really start flowing. The fact is that when we are doing things we have learned well and are part of the safe and the habitual, we really don't learn all that much.. However, when we are out of our depth and out of our own comfort zone, we have to learn. Mission involves risk, but risk involves wonderful new learning for you and your organization.

Less dangerous perhaps, but no less important for the imaginative process, is the need to establish a climate for creativity. In other words, develop a certain ecology where creativity can thrive. It is the function of leadership to passionately value imagination and creativity and rate them as essential resources for mission, ministry and leadership. The leadership of a given community will need to give organizational permission for rethinking, and allow for lots of experimentation, recognizing that this process is dangerous, tricky, and inevitably chaotic.