

# PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

## The Missional Identity of a Christocentric Church

by  
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### *Introduction*

The publication by Epworth Press of a second edition of Frank Baker's *John Wesley and the Church of England* came as welcome news to anyone who has taught a class on Wesley's ecclesiology, or for that matter, on Wesley himself.<sup>1</sup> The availability of Baker's most significant contribution to Wesleyan studies, excepting of course the new edition of *Wesley's Works*, honors a historian who took a delight in providing us with the detailed insights and information that bring to life the past in general and Christian tradition in particular. In the same vein, the tribute by John A. Vickers that prefaces the volume not only gives Baker his due as one of the finest Wesleyan scholars the church has produced, but also gives Frank and Nellie Baker their proper place among the people called Methodists, now acknowledged in the Baker Research Center at Duke Divinity School. Their marriage was a witness to the essence of Christian partnership,<sup>2</sup> and their concern to extend Christian courtesy at every opportunity evinced the very soul of Methodism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970, and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970; Second Edition: Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Baker died on October 11, 1999, and Nellie on August 16, 2000. They were married in 1937.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this is the hospitality extended to German prisoners-of-war by the Bakers and others in their Methodist circuits toward and after the end of World War II. This often took the form of theological discussions over cups of tea, one of their German guests being Jürgen Moltmann.

### *A Wesleyan Compass Heading*

It is altogether appropriate, therefore, to begin with a quotation from *John Wesley and the Church of England*. It happens to be the closing paragraph of the book, and is an excellent compass heading for our investigations:

Although many of [Wesley's] words and actions during eighty years of supposed loyalty to his beloved church appear somewhat bizarre in a churchman; although he frequently shifted ground in his constant protestations of never separating from the church; although he certainly founded a great daughter church in spite of those protestations – and toward the end knew that was doing it; although he was (in a word) inconsistent in his relationships with the Church of England; yet throughout his life was revealed a higher consistency: it was indelibly stamped with the hallmark of 'following providence as it slowly opened out'.

To which might be added that, while it is important read Wesley in the context of the tradition he received and handed on, most especially the Anglican tradition, it is no less important to acknowledge that his theology of church and Christian discipleship alike were profoundly affected by his ministry. He took seriously the response of people to his preaching, most of all the response of ordinary people. He granted their religious experiences full integrity, and he forged a polity for early Methodism that addressed the realities of their social and ecclesial structures.

Put differently, Wesley's ecclesiology and his understanding of Christian discipleship were essentially pragmatic -- not, let it quickly be said, in the sense of the word that shapes and promotes our questionable churchly endeavors today as we scramble to meet the requirements of religious "one-stop shopping" and "designer discipleship."<sup>4</sup> Wesley's pragmatism was rather in the sense of practical measures that served the purpose of the church and the order of God's salvation in the world. The former he saw as first and foremost a reaching out to people with the gospel; the latter as a dynamic of grace that not only changed people's lives, but also the world.

His ecclesiology was forged in the constant tension of authority and commission, of structure and spirit, of tradition and divine imperative, all subjected to the larger work of proclaiming

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted for this phrase to my colleague, John W. Archer, Chair of the Order of Elders in the Memphis Conference of The United Methodist Church. Cf. Philip Sampson, below p.17 and fn 41.

Christ abroad.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, his guidelines for discipleship were the “works of mercy” and “works of piety” that grounded the two great commandments of Jesus -- to love God and to love neighbor -- in the rough and tumble of daily living in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. The *General Rules* of 1743 made clear that, while there were no pre-conditions for Methodist membership other than a desire for salvation, the acceptance of membership entailed post-conditions that were contextually quite explicit.<sup>6</sup> Wesley’s description at the 1745 Conference of the origins of church government give us an important insight into this pragmatism: “Christ sends forth a preacher of the gospel. Some who hear him repent and believe the gospel. They then desire him to watch over them, to build them up in the faith, and to guide their souls in the paths of righteousness.”<sup>7</sup> It was in reaching out to others that Wesley saw the true purpose of the church. Living the gospel that he preached was more important than ecclesiological exactitude.<sup>8</sup> Tradition was less essential to him than reaching out to the tanners in Cornwall, the keelmen in Newcastle, the colliers in Kingswood and Staffordshire, the drunkards, the swearers, and the Sabbath-breakers of Moorfield, and the harlots of Drury Lane.<sup>9</sup> Episcopal succession and parish incumbency were incidental to the apostolic spirit that empowered Christians, clergy and lay, to labor for the good of souls.<sup>10</sup> In short, his concept of the church was subordinate to the ultimate nature and purpose of the God who was in Christ -- a God with a clear mission to redeem humanity and the whole of creation.

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<sup>5</sup> Sermon, “Prophets and Priests,” in *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 4: Sermons IV, 115-151*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), pp.80-81. See also Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, pp. 284ff.

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 9: The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp.69ff.

<sup>7</sup> *John Bennet’s Copy of the Minutes of the Conferences of 1744, 1745, 1747 and 1748; with Wesley’s Copy of those of 1746*. Publications of The Wesley Historical Society. No. 1 (London: Wesley Historical Society, 1896), p.172.

<sup>8</sup> “Reasons against a Separation from the Church of England,” *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 9*, p.337.

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 26: Letters II, 1740-1755* ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p.206.

<sup>10</sup> *The Works of John Wesley: Volume 25: Letters I, 1721-1739*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp.615f.

Wesley's ecclesiological pragmatism was manifest above all in the tortuous course that led him to ordain Methodist preachers for North America in 1784 and for Scotland the following year.<sup>11</sup> This in no way diminished his concern to uphold Anglican ecclesial discipline. He rather took this critical step to ensure that members of Methodist societies who might otherwise be denied full pastoral oversight would continue to receive the sacraments. It meant conceding separation from the Church of England, something against which he had persistently argued and which he opposed for the English societies as long as he lived; but it was consistent with his ecclesial pragmatism. As late as December 1789 he continued to argue the point, though "he knew that what had been done could not be undone, and was therefore prepared to carry full responsibility for the unorthodox behavior into which his peculiar brand of churchmanship had led him."<sup>12</sup>

### *A Crisis of Identity*

If we follow this Wesleyan compass heading, those of us who attempt ecclesiological studies in the Methodist tradition will approach our present situation with the same pragmatism, weighing the nature of the church in balance with its purpose and its context. Once we do this, it becomes clear that The United Methodist Church, and indeed the church throughout the Western world, is facing a crisis of identity that requires a radical review of its ecclesiology and discipleship alike. While the focus of this paper will be ecclesiological, the implications of the argument will point no less forcefully to the need for recovery of a faithful discipleship. The ecclesiocentrism that dominates our present congregational life and work, and the anthropocentrism that consumes our present efforts at discipleship, must alike give way to a Christocentric zeal for the mission of God.

If we truly seek to walk with Christ in the world, we must share his passions and his burdens, for such are the responsibilities and the privilege of being a Christian, concomitant with the

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Baker regards 1784 as the year when Wesley could be said to have "irrevocably severed himself and Methodism" from the Church of England. His account of these critical developments in *John Wesley and the Church of England* remains definitive (chapters 13-15).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.282

benefits of grace upon grace. Once we truly get to know the risen Christ, our personal salvation is perforce rendered secondary to God's redemption of the whole of planet earth. Once the witness of the church is centered on Christ and not on itself, our congregations are infused with a burning hope for the coming Reign of God, on earth as in heaven.<sup>13</sup>

In one of the three sermons published in 1750 that proved to be a watershed for his preaching,<sup>14</sup> Wesley makes the point clearly and cogently:

It is our part thus to 'preach Christ' by preaching all things whatsoever he hath revealed. . . . We are not ourselves clear before God unless we proclaim him in all his offices . . . not only as our great 'High Priest' . . . 'reconciling us to God by his blood', and 'ever living to make intercession for us'; but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord, 'who of God is made unto us wisdom', who . . . 'is with us always, guiding us into all truth'; yea, and as remaining a King for ever, as giving laws to all whom he has bought with his blood . . . until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and 'brought in everlasting righteousness.'<sup>15</sup>

### *Critical Potential*

If the crisis of identity in the Western Church can be traced to a failure to focus on Christ "in all his offices," then it must also be noted that, as with any such moment, this crisis has the potential for much creativity. The adjectives used to describe contemporary Western culture tend to carry the prefix *post*,<sup>16</sup> and for watchful Christians this should impart an anticipation of God's *kairos*. Moreover, while the church in the West has suffered for some time from what can best be described as missional myopia -- an acute shortsightedness in perceiving that one of the most

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<sup>13</sup> See David Lowes Watson, "The Mystery of Evangelism: Mission in an Age of Cosmic Discovery" in *Global Good News: Mission in a New Context*, ed. Howard A. Snyder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pp.26- 40.

<sup>14</sup> "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," and "The Law Established Through Faith, Discourse I & II," in *The Works of John Wesley: Volume2, Sermons II, 39-70*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), pp. 1-43.

<sup>15</sup> Sermon, "The Law Established Through Faith, Discourse II," Ibid. pp.37-38.

<sup>16</sup> See *Faith and Modernity*, ed. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden (Oxford: Regnum/Lynx, 1994).

critical fields for God's mission is the Western world itself -- there is a sense that the Spirit of God is imparting a renewed call to mission among church leaders and members alike.

For one thing, the lengthy involvement of the church with Western culture is now being seriously questioned. In no other part of the world has Christianity exercised more influence and weighed more religious and political power than in Europe and those parts of the world that claim Western heritage. By the same token, Western culture has heavily influenced the church at every level of its life and work: in its teachings, its polity, and most of all its comprehension of the mission of God. Just as the West has undergone profound changes during the modern era, so has the Western Church, though it is only in the twentieth century that these changes have begun to make any real impact on ecclesial self-understandings.<sup>17</sup> Most especially in recent decades there has been a ferment in ecclesiological scholarship pressing toward a missional perception of the church *per se* rather than ecclesiological perceptions of the missionary task of the church.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In Protestantism, the changes have emanated from the dialogue between the two perspectives identified with the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (*conciliar*) and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (*evangelical*). These contrasting missional perspectives have been well documented, though theologically less well examined. The differences continue to emanate from disparate views of *missio Dei*, most especially with regard to soteriology and eschatology. See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), pp.368ff. See also the companion volume edited by Norman E. Thomas, *Classic Texts in Mission & World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

In Roman Catholicism the changes have largely stemmed from the Second Vatican Council (1963-65). Significantly it was not the Council's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) that proved most influential in fostering a missional ecclesiology, but rather the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), regarded by Albert C. Outler as "the masterpiece of Vatican II. See *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (America Press, 1966), pp. 102-106. See also David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 371f. Since Vatican II the vision of *Lumen Gentium* has been enriched by scholars in the Two-Thirds World. For example, Juan Luis Segundo, *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 5 vols. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973-1974). See especially Volume 1: *The Community Called Church*.

Perhaps most stimulating has been the dialogue between the Western Church and Eastern Orthodoxy, whose missiologists and theologians constantly stress the cosmic dimensions of the mission of God implicit in the early church doctrine of *anakephalaiosis*. This teaching, expressing God's plan for the recapitulation or restoration of the whole of the universe, was first formulated by Irenaeus, and centers on the *kenosis* or self-emptying love of God -- a love that should be emulated by a truly missional church. In formulating the doctrine, Irenaeus drew from the New Testament passages dealing with the role of Christ in establishing a new humanity (e.g. Acts 3:21; Ephesians 1:10,22). For a detailed study of Orthodox missiology, see James J. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *The Transfiguration of Mission: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993); James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, ed., *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization: 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), and *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1994).

What is still needed in the midst of this creative ferment is a missional identity for the Christians who faithfully sustain the congregations of the Western Church, and who sense a quest among their ecclesial leaders that does not yet impart a surety of purpose and direction.

### *Cultural Accommodations*

Significantly, the missional myopia of the Western Church has stemmed for the most part from a concern to make the gospel meaningful and relevant to its cultural context -- the ongoing task of *inculturation*. One of the chronic pitfalls of this task, however, is *enculturation* -- the surrender of the church's identity to its cultural context, when the very dimensions of a culture that should be challenged in the name of the risen Christ become incorporated into the life and work of the church, often in the name of the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Protestantism in particular has adjusted quite readily to the individualism of Western culture, condoning a personalized theology that defines the Christian faith as one form or another of the human consciousness.<sup>20</sup> In the late 20th century this has created the widespread perception that one's knowledge of God is a personal privilege, and that believers are therefore epistemologically autonomous.<sup>21</sup> In the public sphere the accommodations made to the culture have been no less conspicuous. Rather than proclaim the thunder of God from Sinai, the mainstream of the church, Protestant and Roman Catholic alike, has tended to serve as a sacralizing agent for the nation state. Just as anthropocentric adjustments have been made to personal faith, so leaders of the church have positioned their social pronouncements to conform with, rather than challenge, the

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The work of the late Lesslie Newbigin is particularly significant, and is now receiving wide attention through a growing network of pastors and missiologists. See also the series, *Christian Mission and Modern Culture*, ed. Alan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin, and Wilbert R. Shenk (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995 ff.), and especially the contribution by Wilbert R. Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed* (1995).

<sup>19</sup> See Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), pp.318ff.

<sup>20</sup> Robert E. Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p.xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.198ff.

prevailing cultural norms, appealing to moral, ethical, and even utilitarian authority rather than to the Christ in whose name they endeavor to prophesy.

It follows that issues of ecclesial identity, most especially in the U.S.A., have essentially been those of congregational vitality and membership satisfaction. On the positive side, this has made congregational studies a significant area of research, providing much needed skills in sustaining communities of faith that can no longer rely on traditional social values for their maintenance.<sup>22</sup> Over against this, however, is the endorsement of popular opinion as the measure and the goal of congregational life and work. What makes this all the more disturbing is that the American church remains very large and very wealthy, and continues to bankroll a great many missional initiatives world wide. While the older patterns of Western paternalism may have been discredited, the cultural accommodations of American Christianity continue to be exported, as often as not carrying the freight of domestic ecclesial and theological differences that have little to do with the mission of God elsewhere.

### *Postmodern Opportunities*

The most significant opportunity to forge a missional ecclesiology, however, is coming from a cultural rather than a theological ferment. The word *postmodernity* has now become common parlance -- a radical uncertainty that has emerged in reaction to the former certainties of Western culture that exercised such influence in the latter period of Christendom. In the postmodern world, consumerism has displaced the ideology of progress and truth, and “dumbing-down” has become the watchword of radically computerized communication. In the postmodern world there is no center. Nothing is certain, and everything is, so to speak, within everyone’s grasp, since the individual is the touchstone for absolute moral authority. In such a climate “the reflection of

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<sup>22</sup> For example, James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). The Alban Institute in Washington, D.C. has been influential in this field. See Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (1991); Keith A. Russell, *In Search of the Church: New Testament Images for Tomorrow’s Congregations* (1994). See also David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution: The Sociology of American Religion*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984).



intellectuals is redundant and becomes self-referential.”<sup>23</sup> By the same token, religious beliefs are increasingly regarded as transitory at best, and at worst mere fads.<sup>24</sup>

The challenge facing the church is whether the gospel can be faithfully conveyed within what Philip Sampson has labeled “the tunnel vision of postmodernity,” a challenge to be regarded with a marked degree of circumspection, for there are “dangerous liaisons” to be avoided, not least of which is to become “another isolated customer center, offering designer religion.”<sup>25</sup> Yet the challenge could well be the most salutary thing to happen to the Western Church in centuries, impelling congregations and denominations to reclaim their essential identity as the church of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit rather than through the cultural accumulations of their socio-political role.

This will mean dynamic missional thinking as opposed to the centripetal ecclesial inertia that has long gripped the churches of Catholicism and Protestantism alike.<sup>26</sup> It will also mean an incarnational view of the church that comes full circle, affirming the coming worldly reality of God's new order on earth as in heaven, rather than the present worldly values of transitory ecclesiastical structures.<sup>27</sup> Nor will creative ecclesiology such as this be limited to the Western Church. As Robert Schreier has well argued, the challenge of sustaining Christian identity while at the same time allowing church tradition to be open to the movement of God in cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Sampson, "The rise of postmodernity," in *Faith and Modernity*, ed. Sampson, Samuel & Sugden, p.32. "The picture presented by modernity included an object world. . . . All this has gone. We now have a surface of representations, without depth and without differentiation. Postmodernity celebrates surface over depth and transforms reality into the figural, into images. Visual images are privileged over words; the immersion of the spectator over the objectivity of the observer. The body and bodily sensation receive a new emphasis. A common paradigm for this is television channel-hopping, involving a series of disconnected images, each in its own present, and each enjoyed for its place in a surface of images with no narrative structure and no map" (Ibid., p.39).

<sup>24</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: HarperCollins/Basic Books, 1993), pp. 14f., 213, 217f., 232.

<sup>25</sup> Sampson, *Faith and Modernity*, pp.39,42.

<sup>26</sup> Robert E. Cushman, "Biblical Election as Sacred History," in *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler*, ed. John Deschner, Leroy T. Howe, and Klaus Penzel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.210.

<sup>27</sup> See Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), pp.40ff.

diversity renders ecclesiology a major issue in the development of local theologies throughout the world.<sup>28</sup>

### *The True Source of Ecclesial Identity*

Given the nature of postmodernity, it would seem that the pursuit of an ecclesial identity should be the adoption of one or more models and metaphors.<sup>29</sup> In an age of paradigm shifts, images carry maximum potential for change, and if the identity crisis of the Western Church is indeed a missional imperative from the Holy Spirit, then an ecclesial self-understanding that is responsive to new paradigms is surely the way to prepare the church for mission and ministry in a changing world.

From the perspectives of postmodernity, this might well make some sense. But from the perspective of the mysterious community called church, it begs a very important question. Simply stated, the church does not determine its own identity; it does not belong to itself; it is the church of the triune God, shaped by the teachings of the risen Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim and embody the gospel in the world. Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy go so far as to suggest that a focus on images of the church tends to isolate ecclesiology from the wider theological task:

The outcome is disastrous. On one level, it prevents critical engagement with the questions of human sociality and its rootedness in the divine creation and redemption. On another level . . . it encourages an approach to the practicalities of church life which owes more to contingency management (or the exercise of power) than to a discerning of the way of the people of God in the world.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), pp.31,38).

<sup>29</sup> Thus, one of the most influential ecclesiological studies in recent years has been Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), in which the church is identified through five models: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant. The expanded edition of the book, published in 1987, adds a sixth model: community of disciples. A similar approach is taken by T. Howland Sanks, *Salt, Light, Leaven and Light: The Community Called Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy, ed., *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), pp.6f.

### *A Divine Missional Mandate*

The self-awareness of the church is unlike that of any other institution because it derives its being solely as an instrument of God. The identity of the church ultimately lies in its knowledge of God, and the church is aware of its true self only to the extent that it is in dialogue with God, both internally and externally. As George Tavad has argued:

There can be no Church without God's prevenient initiative. By the same token, the Church comes to be wherever women and men respond with trust to God's numerous gifts, even though this be only in the interior forum of conscience. . . . The interior dialectic of offer and response has its counterpart at the social level when those who have received God's gift in their hearts testify to it in words and deeds.<sup>31</sup>

There is a further implication. Not only is the identity of the church inextricably related to the mystery of God, but from the very beginnings of the Christian community the divine mystery has also been that of the triune God. Just as the church has been grafted into the particular history of Israel, so its identity across two millennia has been peculiarly Trinitarian.

That an unfathomable depth yawns beyond the Word and beyond the Spirit was suggested in the early Church by the vague yet rich concept, borrowed from the Old Testament, of the glory of God . . . as they caught glimpses of a halo around the image of Jesus Christ that was more than Jesus, and of a radiation from behind the Spirit that was not the Spirit itself. Both the Word incarnate and the Spirit share a glory . . . perceived [in] the presence of the *kabod Adonai* in the Temple.<sup>32</sup>

This is not to argue that a missional identity for the church must be immune from the paradigm shifts of a rapidly changing world. Still less is it to suggest that the God from whom the church derives its true identity is an apathetic, changeless deity. On the contrary, this God is endlessly creative and full of historical surprises.<sup>33</sup> The point is that the changes to which the church should always be ready to respond must emanate from God and not from the world. Insofar as the church has no proper identity other than that which derives from a living

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<sup>31</sup> George H. Tavad, *The Church, Community of Salvation: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p.11. Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp.130ff.; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp.64ff.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp.60f.

<sup>33</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, ed. & tr. M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp.73ff.

relationship with God, then its life and work must be lived in and through the God who is triune and missional. This God will present us with changes aplenty, but the changes will not be disjoined from the divine nature revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, the particular paradigm and empowerment of the church will be the person of Jesus Christ, risen and universally present in the world through the Holy Spirit. As David Bosch has made clear, we can “no longer talk about church *and* mission, only about the mission *of* the church.” God's pilgrim people have no permanent resting place in the world as it is, but rather look to the world as it will be under the reign of Christ. This means involvement in the world, as Christ himself is involved, and if the structures of the church impede such involvement, they must be recognized as heretical. For the life and work of the church are “intimately bound up with God's cosmic-historical plan for the salvation of the world.”<sup>34</sup>

The pressing identity question for the Western Church, along with its Christian companions worldwide, is not how to be responsive to its culture, still less how to present its congregational lifestyles more effectively in a consumerist market. The issue rather is how to be faithful to Jesus Christ, who knows the market infinitely better than any churchly expert, and who has the measure of Western culture more astutely than any social analyst. In a word, the call to mission requires us to become Christocentric in every dimension of our ecclesial life and work -- a requirement that will involve us in the radical reversal of some longstanding churchly thoughts and habits.

### *Spiritual and Worldly Missional Tensions*

Put differently, when we employ models and metaphors for the church, we must always ground them in the God who was in Christ. The images must be incarnational and dynamic, and they will be meaningful only as they clarify and illumine the mission of God, which is to say, the

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<sup>34</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp.372, 378.

saving work of God in the world. The models and metaphors of such an ecclesiology can never be expressed in theological abstractions, important though these may be for the clarification of the missional task. On the one hand, they leave ordinary church members in a constant state of unworthiness, hearing from churchly experts what they *ought* to be doing to engage in the mission of God, but finding themselves less well informed about how to do it -- as do the churchly experts all too often find themselves. On the other hand, in the absence of any direction for the practical application of ecclesiological constructs, congregations of the church will be highly vulnerable to the enculturating influences surrounding and pressuring them on every side.

Church members are already living in the world, and they bring the world with them into their congregations and ecclesial communities. If they are not provided with a missiological identity that readily translates into practical ways of engaging in the mission of God, then their congregations will reflect their respective worldly contexts rather than challenge them because they will have no theological ammunition with which to resist. Ecclesial models and metaphors must always express the tensions of living in a world that still awaits and still resists the coming reign of God. Any ecclesiological image or metaphor, any missional model or strategy -- in short, any attempt to present the identity of the church in a way that evades or minimizes these worldly tensions -- betrays the God who was in Christ, and renders the church highly vulnerable to enculturation.

The task of ecclesiology is to wrestle with these tensions: between the church as theological reality, namely, the mystical body of Christ; and the church as sociological reality, namely, the embodiment of God's mission in the world. Since it is not easy to live in constant tension, the enduring temptation for the church is to opt for one polarity or the other. All too often this results either in a theological ecclesiology that becomes idealized, or a sociological ecclesiology that severs the church's missional link with Christ.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See John W. de Gruchy, "Christian Community," in *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Maryknoll: Orbis Books; 1994), pp.125, 129f

### *Eschatological Tensions*

By contrast, when the church is true to its calling, it accepts these spiritual and worldly tensions, and functions in and through them to the furtherance of God's coming *shalom*. It embraces the eschatological tension of the risen Christ whose kingdom has been inaugurated but whose promises have yet to be fulfilled -- the "now" and the "not yet" of the Kingdom. Of course, the church has a deeply spiritual identity that unites it with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. But the church is also a visible community, a worldly institution, a character wholly in keeping with an incarnational savior and gospel. In drawing a distinction between the church and the messianic fullness of God's salvation, therefore, it is important neither to separate the spiritual and worldly dimensions of the church, nor yet to diminish its role as a divinely elected and ordered community, engaged here and now in the mission of God.<sup>36</sup>

In turn, the spiritual and worldly tensions of a missional identity involve the church in the eschatological tensions of the gospel. In the Protestant ecclesial tradition, the theologian whose work has done most to reawaken the church to these tensions is Jürgen Moltmann. Since Christ is the subject of the church, argues Moltmann, and Christology is the dominant theme of ecclesiology, the church can only be understood by the yardstick of the gospel of Christ. A truly Christocentric ecclesiology therefore means that the church deals with the world the way God deals with the world -- with a universal, eschatological hope. Indeed, the more the Christian West disintegrates, the more the church finds its identity in the context of the whole world. For the creative righteousness of God is ultimately that of a new creation, not a new church.<sup>37</sup> Within this worldly context of eschatological hope, the church is the sign of a new order breaking in.

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<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that, while Wesley's concept of the church underwent a number of changes during the course of his life's work, the underlying principle was always that of the nineteenth Article of the Church of England: "1. The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same. 2. As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of ceremonies, but also in matters of faith." Wesley used the first part of the Article both as defense and attack against his detractors, but also accepted the reasoning of the second part. This is less frequently cited, but was no less significant in shaping his ecclesiological pragmatism.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, pp.6ff.,13ff.,30ff.

This is not, however, a worldly order, still less a vaguely divine order. It is an *oikonomia* under the lordship of Christ, who has been named as the ruler of the redeemed planet earth.<sup>38</sup> Rather than “Jesus is Lord,” declares Moltmann, the church should proclaim that “The Lord is Jesus,” lest he become a mere personality cult in the privatized world of postmodernity. Jesus is more than this; much more. He is the world's humiliated judge, and the church must take on his destiny.<sup>39</sup>

There has been no clearer missional challenge to the Western Church than the exposure by Moltmann more than quarter of a century ago that so much of its life and work was in effect a center of human religiosity. The church has become “what it never was and, according to the New Testament, can never want to be, i.e. a *cultus privatus*.”<sup>40</sup> As it has slipped into the role of guardian of the private conscience, the church has encouraged pietistic subjectivity in place of Christian hope. Dismissing as irrelevant the dialectic of “complementarity,” which he regards as a false justification of the church as it is, Moltmann poses what has always been the real question for the church, namely, whether or not it is truly the church. Only to the extent that the church has acted with its Lord in the history of God's salvation, the *missio Dei*, the coming reign of God, can it be said to have been truly the church:

Christianity must demonstrate, preserve, and account for the truth which is revealed in Christ. It cannot withdraw into the calm realm of subjective choice, nor can it talk supernaturally about faith. The lived-out testimony of the raising of Jesus must stand the test of the historical, anthropological and sociological illumination of reality, since it calls into question all other conceptions of reality, even the thesis about the subjective choice of these understandings, because it sees the world in the horizon of divine judgment. [The church is] the apostolic action involving Jesus within the universal horizon of the expectation of the eschaton.<sup>41</sup>

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38 For a detailed theological exposition of this theme, see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

39 Ibid., pp.26, 102, 129.

40 Jürgen Moltmann, *Hope and Planning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.132.

41 Ibid., pp.142-144.

### *Ecclesial Transience*

When we consider the church in this light, it can mean only one thing. Not only will the fullness of the reign of God will bring to an end the present world order; it will also bring to an end the church as we know it. No longer shall people “teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord” (Jer 31:34). On that day, there will be no more need of Christians, for the promises of Jesus and God's glorious affirmation of his work in raising him from the dead will have been fulfilled.

This ought to be the foundation of all that we are and do as Christians. Yet we rarely think of our churchly life and work in this way, and when the transience of our endeavors is stated in as many words, it catches us unawares, enfolded as we are in the marginalized institutionalism and enculturated voluntarism of Western ecclesial life. Were we truly committed to the mission of God, we would realize that our identity as Christians is very temporary indeed. Since we are entrusted with announcing to the world that God's victory in Jesus Christ will one day be universal, then clearly, when God's victory is fulfilled, no further announcement will be required. On that day, the glory will be Christ's, and Christ's alone. All things will be “from him, to him, and through him, and to him will be glory forever” (Romans 11:36). Christians will be caught up into something infinitely more glorious than the church. We will be part of a new heaven, a new earth, a new humanity, a new order, a new creation, in which our task as messengers will be redundant.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> I have endeavored to apply this perspective to the congregational setting in *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship Groups and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991).



### *Planned Obsolescence*

We must now ask what are the implications of an eschatological identity for the church. How are we to engage in the mission of God while living in the tension of the “now” and the “not yet” of the coming reign of God? The answer emerges with some cogency: The church must be about planning its own obsolescence.

For churches in Europe and some other parts of the non-American Western world, this could well have a hollow ring. Clergy and laity alike in these countries continue to experience church closings and realignments that wound and dishearten. Precisely because of this recent history, however, they are likely to be much more open to such a perspective than their colleagues in the American church, where the idea of planned obsolescence will probably be viewed with rank disbelief. Committed to buildings and programs measured in billions of dollars, and serving a wide range of social and community needs, American churches are heavily involved in planning their own future. And in many instances this is because they have been coopted into providing secular community building that a consumerist culture no longer has the vision or the commitment to provide for itself.<sup>43</sup> Too often the church is viewed as a source of alms, or mentors for social education, or trustworthy brokers, depending on the exigencies of the situation.<sup>44</sup>

Some element of forward planning is of course essential for the church if it is to discern the will of God in a rapidly changing world. However, if such planning is not grounded in an identity that is consistent with the promises of the gospel, it is open to serious misinterpretation and misuse by church leaders, clergy and lay, who stagger under the weight of institutional

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<sup>43</sup> The most recent example of this is the project of the Bush administration to fund faith-based projects in social outreach. The issue of whether this blurs the distinction between church and state is less important than the fact that it manipulates the church into assisting the state to practice dereliction of social duty. A church committed to serving the Risen Christ must be centered on the coming Reign of God, in which the whole of humanity, indeed the whole of planet earth, is summoned to live under the rule of God’s love and justice. I have addressed this issue in “Proclaiming Christ in All His Offices: Priest, Prophet, and Potentate,” in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), pp.113-133.

<sup>44</sup> See Stanley Hauerwas, “Preaching As Though We Had Enemies,” *First Things* 53 (May 1995):45-49.

insecurities. All the more need, therefore, for congregational life and work to be centered on Christ rather than on the church.

The propagation of planned obsolescence as an ecclesiological identity will require much pastoral leadership in the Western Church. It will also require leadership from Christian colleagues elsewhere in the world, whose ecclesial perspectives have been less conditioned by their cultures. Such joint leadership might engender not only a global collegiality in the mission of God, but also a new empathy between Christians worldwide and those of North America in particular. In awakening a sense of the missional challenge of their own Western culture, Christians in other parts of the world might gain a better understanding of their American sisters and brothers, whose ecclesial opulence too often engender disdain or envy, neither of which meets the criterion of Christian charity.

The point at issue is not that the church should regard its present worldly work as moribund. This may well be the reaction of disheartened clergy and despondent laity who have watched their churches slip into a vortex of ecclesiocentrism and thereby lose their missional vision and energy for the world -- as often as not, a world right on their ecclesial doorsteps. It is a pattern all too common in Europe, and is now increasingly common in the U.S.A. as well, especially in inner city and rural congregations where institutional survival is a constant drain on every resource. This is not the kind of obsolescence that can shape a missional identity, not least because it is very rarely planned.

It is when Christian communities of faith regard themselves as heralds of the coming reign of God that they find their missionary vision energized and their ministry empowered.<sup>45</sup> It therefore stands to faith and reason alike that if Christians pray for the coming of this kingdom on earth as in heaven, as Jesus himself taught, then they can confidently expect their prayer to be answered (Matthew 6:9-13). This renders their identity as Christians imminently obsolete. Knowing it,

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<sup>45</sup> Howard Snyder has put it well: "Churches that vitally embody the gospel are churches with an active kingdom vision . . . prompting both an immediacy of witness and action and a certain calm patience based in the confidence that the kingdom is fundamentally God's work, not ours. We confess that our present efforts, successful or unsuccessful as they may be, point ahead and contribute to a more ultimate reconciliation whose final coming is not in doubt (*Models of the Kingdom* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991], p.129).

affirming it, and reminding one another about it, would provide a constant compass heading for the true work of the church, the mission of God. It is an identity that could infuse congregations with new energy and provide them with new vision and purpose. It could shape the church around the eschatological reality that the kingdom of God is far more glorious, its announcement far more urgent, and its fulfilment far more certain, than anything the church is or does. In a word, it would make clear that the church is an eschatological anachronism.

Thus it will be with the sign community called church when the reign of God fulfills the promises of Christ. On that day, there will be no more sound of weeping or cries of distress (Isaiah 65:19). Instead, there will be sight for the blind and release for captives (Luke 4:18-19). But also on that day there will be no more Christians and no more church, for all will know the Lord (Jer 31:34).

### *A Wesleyan Benediction*

All of which brings us back to John Wesley. Late in life, his sermons opened a horizon that transcended his own evangelistic ministry, the witness of his societies, and his understanding of the church. He proclaimed an eschatological vision that is also the theme of this Institute. After a lifetime of preaching the gospel to all who would hear, and of striving to renew rather than divide the church, Wesley left us with the fullness of God's promise as nothing less than a new creation:

And in every nation under heaven we may reasonably believe God will observe the same order which he hath done from the beginning of Christianity. 'They shall all know *me*,' saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is the wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but 'from the least to the greatest,' that the praise may not be of men, but of God. Before the end even the rich shall enter the kingdom of God. Together with them will enter in the great, the noble, the honorable; yea, the rulers, the princes, the kings of the earth. Last of all the wise and learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will be convinced that they

are fools; will 'be converted and become as little children, and enter into the kingdom of God.'<sup>46</sup>

The anticipation of this fulfilment at a time when humanity is just beginning to glimpse the wonder of God's cosmos is surely enough to shake us out of our centripetal ecclesiology and our anthropocentric discipleship. It all depends, of course, on the willingness of our pastoral leaders, clergy and lay, to be shepherds of the flock, not hirelings – another Wesleyan compass-heading.

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<sup>46</sup> Sermon, "The General Spread of the Gospel," in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2, Sermons II: 34-70*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 494.