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CROSS Purposes

a forum for theological dialogue

Contents

CROSS Purposes

Welcome back to *Cross Purposes*, where discussion of the Christian faith, "alternative" and otherwise, continues.

The major article in this issue is by Garry Deverell, tackling some of the challenges raised by the "Emerging Church" and "Alternative Worship" schools of thought. Garry responds to Wolfgang Simson, a German missiologist who recently visited Melbourne, and who has summarized his take on "alternative" theology in fifteen theses. Garry critiques each in turn, contending that Simson has at many points disregarded or misinterpreted central elements of Christian history, and has fallen captive to the modern Western culture that he seeks to transform.

This issue's sermon, from Anita Monro, is an example of an "alternative" style of preaching with emphasis on symbol, movement and poetic language, finding a Christ-figure in the "Clown of the Carnival".

John Evans offers a very different sort of challenge to the modern church, focussing on its relationship with the state. John attracted much media attention last year by openly questioning whether Good Friday should remain a public holiday. Here he explains why this controversy is important.

We also feature two articles in the "op. cit." section. The discussion of David Merritt's take on "progressive Christianity" continues with a response from Graeme Harrison on the place of sin within the Christian metanarrative. And Paul Tonson's advocacy of engagement between the church and other faiths is pursued further by Sandy Yule. Finally, John Vander Reest finds much to admire in Calvin's ecumenism, as set out in a recent book celebrating his 500th birthday.

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Letters

Sins of Method

In the 14th edition (September 2008) of *Cross Purposes*, Craig Thompson (*Op. cit*.) responds to the article in the 13th edition concerning progressive theology by David Merritt. Thompson chooses from the many aspects of orthodox theology critiqued by Merritt the particular issue of the link between "sin" and "salvation". For Thompson, the reality of sin is linked irrevocably and exclusively with the crucifixion of Jesus as "the event of the revealing of sin", requiring a "saviour". By this means he apparently hopes to sidestep the troublesome doctrine of "original sin". Even so, this pales into insignificance alongside his qualification of sin as that committed by "Israel" in its exclusive culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus. Thompson is apparently unaware of the almost sixty years of Christian effort to interpret scripture in a way which does not further the cause of antisemitism. Thompson's article takes us back before the ground-breaking proclamation of *Nostrae Aetate,* in which the Catholic Church formally asked the pardon of the Jews for its historical attribution of sole blame to them for the crucifixion of Jesus.

As is often the case with those who identify specifically as "theologians", the ideas here are clearly posited from an uncritical, literal reading of scripture. The "sermon of Peter" is treated here as a historical record of a historical occasion, rather than as a polemical proclamation by a gospel writer engaged in a bitter struggle to persuade mainstream Judaism that it ought to recognize Jesus as its Messiah. That the majority of Jews did not do so, is evident in the hostility of early Christ followers to the Jewish leadership. The gospels are sermons crafted to make the case for Jesus as Messiah; the book of Acts likewise. To prop up doctrinal propositions concerning "sin" and "salvation" by means of an uncritical reading of scripture leaves open the possibility of developing flawed, and even harmful, theology. If nothing else, the methodology Thompson has used in his article reveals a crying need for the deliberate development of links between the exponents of "systematic theology" and those who have made study of the bible their speciality. Such links are long overdue. They may even be mutually advantageous.

Revd. Dr. Lorraine Parkinson
Chair, Vic-Tas Synod Working Group on
Christian-Jewish Relations

Craig Thompson reponds...

I confess that I find in myself a strange mix of agreement and disagreement with Dr. Parkinson's critique. I agree that the Gospels and Acts are sermonic in character and not "a historical record". I agree with her about the theological and political dangers of reading the scriptures in such a way as to feed antisemitism, and I further agree that more engagement of "theologians" and biblical scholars would be very mutually

advantageous, although I do wonder why only "theologians" and "systematic theology" deserve to be qualified by quotation marks and not those who have made bible study their speciality.

That being said, I will limit myself to two points in response. The first concerns the nature of theological discourse, and what might be an appropriate theological method. Not only the Gospels and Acts, but the New Testament as a whole is preaching. "History", as it seems to function in Dr. Parkinson's letter, scarcely registers with significance at all. This is, however, characteristic of just about any human discourse, including theological methodologies which appeal to "history". An historical account of anything already rests within an intent "to make the case for" something, whether Jesus or anything else. We must take with utter theological seriousness that not only the New Testament but most human discourse is a sermonizing upon sermons. Drawing a distinction between what Luke does with Peter and what a modern historical-critical exegete might do with Luke does not hold much water, as the historical exegete has as much an agenda of which we may be suspicious as did Luke himself. The real question, theological and historical, is what it means to say anything if this is the case.

My second point concerns the particular aspect of my essay with which Dr Parkinson takes issue. My interest in who killed Jesus was merely in relation to the dynamic of forgiveness as it appears in the relationship of oppressed and oppressor (in Acts 4, Jesus and the Jerusalem hierarchy). Being "saved", in Peter's sermon in Acts 4, amounts to coming to terms with the fact that my victim will meet me in "heaven"—the last place I would expect to find him. That Jesus dies at the behest of the religious authorities cannot be used to blame all Jewry for the crucifixion, but Luke/Peter's confrontation of the guilty party with the possibility of repentance can characterize how Jews and Gentiles alike, in all places and times, are called to account for their willingness to sacrifice others for their own purposes, or for God's. While drawing on the specific relationship the Jerusalem hierarchy had to the crucifixion, the target of my essay was not Israel at all but each of us who claims to be saved and yet has not come to the point of an accounting before our victims. If my article – originally a sermon – gave the sense that antisemitism is justified from the New Testament narratives then it failed as sermon because it failed the gospel, and not simply in any political or religious offence which might have been taken. I do not believe, however, that close attention to what I wrote in the essay would lend that conclusion any credibility.

Note. The theme of "sin" as discussed in David Merritt's article is taken up further in this issue by Graeme Harrison. Lorraine Parkinson will reflect at greater length on interfaith dialogue in the next issue of Cross Purposes.

through a glass darkly

Anita Monro

The Place of Carnival

Sermon on John 12:20-33

This sermon was preached at a eucharistic service held on Friday 4 April 2003, the culmination of the annual Seminar Week of United Theological College and the School of Continuing Education for Ministries within the Centre for Ministry of the Uniting Church NSW Synod. The service was held in the round. The sermon involved movement by the preacher around the chapel and in interaction with several objects beneath a wall cross—a bowl of earth, a bowl of seeds, a straggly plant (purple crucifix orchid); the communion table; a painting of the crucifixion of Jesus by Doug Purnell beside the wall cross; and a sad clown ceramic mask placed on the communion table. Some indications of movement are given in italics. The preacher was dressed in the manner of the "Pierrot"—the white-faced, sad clown. A slide presentation prepared by Peter Hobson accompanied the preaching. The chapel was dressed as a place of carnival with a myriad of colours being displayed in drapes and masquerade masks.

Beginning to one side of the communion table within the congregation

So here we are—in Jerusalem,
the festival city,
the place of carnivale,
where peasants ride as royals,
and royals ride in peace
and the powerful do not prevail
because of the crowd.

moving to the entry of the chapel, facing the communion table

Here we are in Jerusalem,
the place of carnivale,
where the world is turned
upside-down,
where humans are raised up to die,
where death is couched in words of
glorification,
and saviours speak of the kinds of
deaths they'll die.

moving to stand in front of the lectern to the other side of the communion table

Here we are in Jerusalem,
the festival city,

the place of carnivale,
the place where death serves life.

A bitter message in the midst of the language of glorification.
A bitter message amid the clamour and the ardour of the crowds.
A bitter message in the face of such devotion.
A bitter message promising life.

A cynical message in the face of world events.
A cynical message in the face of death that serves noone
but the powerful, the wealthy, the removed.
A cynical message clothed in promises of life.

A crude message in the face of desolation,
of death and destruction,
of real blood and real "casualties",
and real lives and real people
and real stories…
and grieving husbands, mothers, brothers, daughters,
sisters, fathers, sons and wives.

crossing behind the communion table and walking towards the large wall cross and the painting of the crucified Jesus

This is the place where death serves life? *(indicating the table setting and gathered community)*

speaking towards the painting

How far O Clown of the Carnival are you willing to take your role?
How far are you prepared to go to show the upside-down values of this God you claim to know?
You've sat with us at table
and touched the leper's skin,
but will you show us what you're made of,
and prove that you are kin?
Not just kin to the outcast and the stranger,
the people of the street,
but kin to the fearful frailty of our humanness,
the skin, the bone, the meat.

Will you prove that you are one of us,
the people of the earth *(sifting earth from a bowl)*
not just a carnival ring-in
an accidental royal birth
dressed up in pretend finery
just for the Easter mirth?

How far O Clown of God are you willing
to be with us your people?
To stand in human feet?
To feel the pain of humanness?
The agony of a heartbeat? *(double beating the chest as per heartbeat)*

How far O Clown of God are you willing
to know that you can cut it
and be cut with all the rest,
in the midst of human misery,
the dirt, the crud, the weed? *(indicating earth and plant)*

Are you prepared to show us
that you too are dust O Jesus,
and to dust you shall inevitably go?
That in your very body,
the dwelling place of God,
lives an equal humanness
and death the Master of…

O God who comes in human form,
prove to us you're real,
not just a figment
of collective crowd hysteria,
an imaginary *vréel,*
an illusive illusory illusion
of a magician's spinning wheel.

moving with bowl of earth towards communion table and placing it there

We don't want your baptism in water O Christ.
No, nor even one in fire.
We'd rather see you baptized with the human stuff of earth,
proving your own humanity—human clay, human birth.

indicating bowl of earth

This is the place where death serves life.

moving to lectern side of the communion table

Be for us a seed that we will bury in the ground,
And check out on the third day to see if you're still around.

Be for us the humus,
the organic matter yielding
the fruits of mortal yearnings,
the basic stuff of healings.

Be for us the humour,
the fluids of our living,
the blood, the water-serum, and the bile
the sense of the absurd
the stuff of incongruity,
the laughter of the cynic,
comic, fool, and the child.

Be for us the human,
the real, the living one,
relating and relational,
a frail and mortal one.

Show us true humility
O self-limiting one of God
aware that you are nothing
more than common garden sod.

Decompose with us in paddocks and paddies and plots
and rise with us in heath and grass and grain.
and show us that you understand mortality
not simply as the holy curse of God
but humbly as the gift of our humanity,
O treasured one of God.
The hides of buried treasure
are the deep bowels of the earth,
and the treasure of the kin-dom
is the gift of mortal birth.

And when the show has ended,
will we dare to understand
that glory rising out of death
is nothing but your being human.
It's nothing about a war,
and nothing about a sacrifice for peace,
and everything about the truth
that once God was with us,
inhabiting our fleece:
the seed that once was buried,
dying deep within the earth
and sprouting green at Easter
to produce a crop of worth.

indicating self

This is the place that death serves life.

indicating others

This and this and this is the place that death serves life.

indicating whole community

This is the place that death serves life.

moving towards cross and bowl of seeds

Here in our frail humanity
seated humbly in the presence of God,
the carnival king lives once again
as common garden sod.
And the God who dared to come
once in human form
finds seed again in the mortal stuff of earth.

raising bowl of seeds and bringing it to the communion table

In our humanity,
in God's humanity,
in every place and time,
God brings forth salvation,
bearing hopefulness to birth,
and risking the way of Jesus
in humble, mortal earth.

scattering seed into the bowl of earth

This is the place where death serves life.

indicating self

This is the place where death serves life.

indicating others and moving around the communion table

This and this and this and this is the place that death serves life.

backing towards the chapel entry and indicating whole community

This is the place that death serves life.

indicating communion table

And here we gather to remember it again.

moving slowly towards the communion table, raising the ceramic mask and displaying it around the congregation, placing the mask against the bowl of earth

Here in this place of carnivale,
this festive hope-filled place,
this place where the powerful never prevail,
the world is always upside down,
where rulers come in peace,
and peasants feast royally
upon the Carnival Clown.

Anita Monro is minister of the Uniting Church in Armidale, NSW.

on Areopagus Hill

John Evans

Of Holy Days and Holidays

Once the only permitted break one got from the drudgery of work was a holy day. As the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* itself notes, the meaning of a holiday and a holy day were once inseparable.[1] Sunday, the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, was the obvious holy day—but there were others, sometimes many others, on the calendar. By the late 19th century the term "weekend" arose, although then it was only from Saturday lunchtime through to Monday morning. And of course the long weekend came much later, when a "public holiday" marking or recalling some national or civic event, was conveniently located on a Monday.

In 2008, just before Easter, I publicly questioned whether Australia should have a holiday, a public holiday, for Good Friday. Yes it was undoubtedly a holy day, but should it still be a holiday? Was it still appropriate that this be a day on which we do no work because it actually signifies something for the Australian community?

In my media release at the time I observed that Australia was now a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, indeed a very secular nation. Was a religiously based holiday still appropriate? (Especially as Easter is on a date which even Christians cannot agree, with Orthodox Christians still having a different day.) I noted in the media release that "the great issue facing Australia is the division between our different religious and ethnic groups; and between all of us latecomers and the First Peoples of the land". And as Good Friday is "all about reconciliation between humanity and God through the cross of Christ", a public holiday about "national reconciliation, the very message of Good Friday" would be appropriate. I didn't give a date, but in subsequent media interviews Mabo Day (3 June) was suggested as a possible day we might call the National Day of Reconciliation.

The response was swift and animated. The idea that a Christian minister would suggest that we lose a public holiday at Easter was news! And it generated considerable interest and debate, as far as any news cycle permits. Some of course completely misunderstood, gauging from the abusive phone calls and letters I received. The Uniting Church was tampering with Christian tradition and now even denying the crucifixion of Christ! Most, however, savoured

[1] "Holiday", *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1973 ed.

the irony of the proposition: if Australia is not really a Christian nation anymore, should there really be public holidays for the holiest season in the Christian calendar? It was a challenge: either live out your faith, or drop the faith-based holiday and move on.

And here I must confess. The primary reason for my press release was to have a discussion about the meaning and significance of Easter in the wider media. Threatening, even suggesting to take an Australian's public holiday away, will get attention… and it did! Easter, apart from the set piece stories of the Pope washing feet, someone re-enacting a crucifixion somewhere and a few paragraphs on Easter day services, is relegated to being just news about the religious practices of a significant community group. Easter's actual meaning and significance does not get media attention—unlike, say, the attention the media now give to the meaning and significance of Anzac Day. So to openly talk of reconciliation as an Easter theme, and to tie that into an Australian context was, I believed, important.

This all, however, begs the question—should this pre-eminently holy day be a public holiday today? Indeed, how one answers that question will depend on how you see the church engaging our diverse and secular Australian culture, and its role in a post-Christendom world.

Recently a betting authority announced that it would be operating on Good Friday. The proposal is that people can place bets on whatever was going around in Australia or other parts of the world that day, Good Friday. Apart from one cleric noting that betting on Good Friday was a time honoured tradition – the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' tunic at the foot of the cross – the response from church leaders was that the nation needed a break from our frenetic rhythm of life. As a people, we Australians also should acknowledge a spiritual dimension to life. Good Friday was a holy day and we thus should ponder its significance, and thus clear it from distractions.

Now I would suggest these are fine reasons—but, regrettably, hasn't the tussle over this already been lost, with the vast changes that have now taken place with regard to Sunday observance? Good Friday observance becomes the last vestige of a Christian heritage. Indeed in other countries, like the United States, Good Friday is not even a holiday. Christians are required to show their faith, in a secular context, by taking time off work, or attending services in their own time, or in some way making a public statement.

> "The task of the state is not to dictate values and morals to those who do not believe."

I would submit that it is appropriate that where a majority of the population sees the importance and significance of

the holy day, and as such it has national significance, then it should be a public holiday. But today is this appropriate if it is only a minority which imposes its approach to a holy day on the rest of society? This is *the* critical issue for the Church as it engages a postmodern and post-Christian society like Australia. One day the issue might be Good Friday and its observance, the next day it could be aspects of sexuality, and the next, blasphemy or whatever. Indeed here is the classic fissure that opens out between conservative and liberal Christians. It is not over biblical interpretation or theology—but over political theory and the role of freedom, and if you like, the scope and extent of freedom in Christ. Does one conserve the values of the past, the place and position of the Church as in the past? Does one not need to hold fast to orthodoxy and orthopraxis, by whatever means: political lobbying and protest, political parties, whatever?

This issue was famously fought out in the Hart-Devlin debate of the 1960s over the role of the criminal law to enforce morals, and in particular whether homosexuality was appropriately a crime.[2] Should Christians be able to use the law to enforce morals and public behaviour—such as what can or cannot happen on Good Friday? Or does one accept human freedom and affirm that only in and through a person's freedom can they determine their relationship with God, and thus their behaviour? In other words, for the liberal, the task of the state is not to dictate values and morals to those who do not believe, that remains a task for the church and Christians generally. And the corollary is that there thus should be a separation between church and state. The church cannot expect the state to do its work.

Of course, the current global financial crisis has again starkly raised the question of whether freedom (here freedom to operate in financial markets unrestrained) should be curtailed or limited in some way. We are now asking, What are the essential values of a society which should be maintained and preserved for the good of all, for society's own health and well being? Certainly the great heritage of Christianity, and even of Christendom itself, provides such values and limits on freedom and must be present in the debate. But is Good Friday, as a public holiday, for the good of all, even though all do not believe in Jesus?

I personally don't believe Good Friday should continue to be a public holiday—we have lost that right! We, as the church keeps on saying, are marginalized. Wouldn't losing the Good Friday holiday be a useful sign to ourselves and to our society that Christians are so marginalized? There are other and more significant vestiges of Christendom we should seek to preserve, rather than public holidays which have become disconnected from their origins. But if Easter remains as the great long weekend of the year (which I suspect it will), we in return have every right to call our nation's bluff, and question why Australia

[2] See P. Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London: OUP, 1965) and H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961).

should still have the public holiday if its citizens do not observe its religious significance! So, insofar as this holy day remains a holiday, the Church needs to be a loud and clear as to "the public" nature of Good Friday—and break out of how the media treat the day as just a private devotional day, a day only for the Christian community to stop and reflect.

The cross of Christ has cosmological significance. So, for example, Good Friday is about reconciliation. The critical issues of reconciliation are not only theological, but also profoundly practical. Aboriginal reconciliation stands out for Australians as the issue as to why Christ died that day. Furthermore, as citizens of the world, surely we need to speak about the relevance of that death in Jerusalem 2000 years ago to a conflict which still rages in that region today; a region in which our soldiers are stationed. Easter is also about resurrection and new life. Indeed one of the delightful reasons that Easter is such a great public holiday, is that it keeps us guessing as to its date—the date for it each year moves! The reason it moves is its relationship to the most primal of events—a full moon. Can this not be used to open up Easter's significance? Of course other cultures, and other religions, relate their rhythm to nature in this way and use a lunar calendar. In our disconnected world, where humanity believes it has taken control of all things including nature's rhythms (and in the process has degraded the environment), this festival, connected to the rise of new life, at the time of a full moon, surely speaks publicly to our world. And there are many, many other public dimensions to Good Friday and Easter.

Public holiday or not, Good Friday, Easter, will always be the holiest of days.

John Evans is minister of Church of All Nations in Carlton.

Garry Deverell

"Emerging" Church and "Alternative" Worship

a theological critique

There is considerable interest in the notions of "alternative worship" and "emerging church" at present. For some these terms represent the potential for reinvigorating all those shrinking and ageing congregations of ours. For others, they offer the hope of spiritual refuge from all that is dead and institutional about the church. For many of the most radical within the movement, "emerging church" is about nothing less than revolution—a deliberate abandoning of the church as we know it in favour of a completely "new" imagining of the people of God. But what *is* the emerging church, exactly, and what difference would its remodelling make to the ritual and worship life of its communities? In the middle of last year the local mission network "Forge" brought Wolfgang Simson, a German missiologist, out to Melbourne to talk about precisely these questions. Simson's programmatic article, "Fifteen Theses Toward a Reformation of Church",[1] has been widely circulated within the "emerging church" and "alt worship" movements. Although not all within that particular fold will have actually read the theses, I take them to be an admirably succinct summary of what many-to-most "alt church" enthusiasts, when pressed, actually believe about the nature of the church. What follows is a blow-by-blow appreciation and critique of Simson's fifteen theses, with a view to demonstrating the fragility (if not the absurdity) of some of the "emerging church" movement's most deeply held convictions.

Thesis One: Church is a Way of Life, not a series of religious meetings

> Before they were called Christians, followers of Christ have been called "The Way". One of the reasons was that they have literally found "the way to live". The nature of Church is not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings led by professional clergy in holy rooms specially reserved to experience Jesus, but in the prophetic way followers of Christ live their everyday life in spiritual extended families as a vivid answer to the questions society faces, at the place where it counts most: in their homes.

Simson is right to say that church is a way of life. The pastoral epistles of the New Testament testify that turning to

[1] simsonwolfgang.de/html/15_theses.html

Christ involves the transformation of one's whole being, a veritable conversion of the self in the whole business of one's life. This conversion was understood to affect absolutely everything: internal psychology, relationships, ethics, community, politics. Christ called for nothing less than a dying to all that was status quo, in favour of a radically new way of being human that these same epistles call, in short-hand, "church".

Simson is quite wrong, however, to say that this Way of Life is "not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings lead by professional clergy in holy rooms specially reserved to experience Jesus". This is to both to misrepresent historic Christianity (even and especially the experience of the early church) and to seriously misjudge the needs of God's people in our present cultural climate. The early church came into being because of the singular interruption of God's reign in the event of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and giving of the Spirit to Christ's disciples. Theologically, the authors of the New Testament understand these events as the inauguration of a new community known as the "church" or the "body of Christ". It is important to understand what these metaphors actually mean. "Church" means a "gathering of people". The "body of Christ" means a gathering of people who, together—and only together—can claim to be the real presence of Christ for a post-resurrection world. The logic of church is therefore grounded in the notion of a *community that is gathered together to become the real presence and mission of Christ for the world*. Simson therefore has it all the wrong way around. It is *only* by meeting together, it is *only* by gathering together precisely as "church" and "body of Christ" that Christians learn the practical competence to live the life of Christ in the world, as prophets, evangelists, servants and (yes) martyrs. Without this "special" gathering for a "religious" purpose there can be no Christian way of life.

The word "religious" means "binding" or "vow", and from the beginning Christians understood that in baptism they had received God's binding vow of forgiveness and faithfulness. What Christians were now called to do, therefore, was to make and keep a similar vow of forgiveness and faithfulness toward the brothers and sisters of their particular church community. In this mutuality of commitment the community members were bound both to Christ and to one another. The "special meetings" of the community were indispensable for the disciplined practice of that vow because it was right there, in the community gathered for worship, that Christians *learned* to be Christians. In the early Christian liturgies of word and meal, Christians were formed into a cohesive body that was able to do Christ's work in the world. If they failed to come to the special worship meetings that took place on Sundays, it was well understood that they also failed to persevere in their conversion to Christ's way of life. There is plenty of evidence from early historical sources that non-attendance was taken very seriously. Not for the sake of

non-sensical rules, but because worship was seen as the primary place in which Christ formed his people for mission and ministry.

I must also point out that "special rooms" for gathering were part of the church from the very beginning, even when it met mainly in houses. The historical evidence suggests that the earliest churches met in the homes of their wealthiest members, because they had the space to transform their ordinary rooms into extra-ordinary places of encounter with a living Christ. It is even likely that different parts of the house were used for different parts of the liturgy. The parlour (just inside the door) would be used for the gathering rites. The schoolroom (where the children were tutored) or the central courtyard would be used for the readings, the preaching and the prayers for others. The dining room would be used for the celebration of the Lord's supper. Then back to the parlour for the missional rites which appropriately accompanied the community's leave-taking. And yes, before you ask, the liturgy was indeed quite formal in places. It was led by the "elders" of the community, who had been specifically set aside to gather the community for worship, teaching, and the organization of practical care. The leaders were generally well respected and literate, well-schooled in bible and in the worship traditions of the Jewish people. And yes, the community usually paid them so that they could devote most of their time and energy to these tasks. In that sense, they were "professional" clergy, and they were already operating like that in the New Testament. The New Testament word for "elder" is *presbyteros*, which was translated into Latin as "priest" long before English translations of the bible came along. It is important, at this juncture, to note that Jesus' own rabbinic ministry was only made possible because his practical needs were met by the wealthy women of his circle.

Thesis Two: time to change the system

> In aligning itself to the religious patterns of the day, the historic Orthodox Church after Constantine in the 4th century AD adopted a religious system which was in essence Old Testament, complete with priests, altar, a Christian temple (cathedral), frankincense and a Jewish, synagogue-style worship pattern. The Roman Catholic Church went on to canonize the system. Luther did reform the content of the gospel, but left the outer forms of "church" remarkably untouched; the Free-Churches freed the system from the State, the Baptists then baptized it, the Quakers dry-cleaned it, the Salvation Army put it into a uniform, the Pentecostals anointed it and the Charismatics renewed it, but until today nobody has really changed the superstructure. It is about time to do just that.

Again, there are serious historical errors in this account. I agree that Constantinian Christianity began to model the church after the imperial hierarchy of the Empire. Bishops (elders to several churches rather than just one) began to dress like Roman courtiers and lord it over their presbyters and deacons. Special church buildings (which Christians had been erecting from as

early as the end of the 2nd century) got bigger and bigger, so that they began to mirror the imperialistic majesty of the Roman courts and senate chambers. All this is true, and to be deplored. But what Simson fails to note is that priests, altar, incense and the synagogue-styled worship pattern had been part of the Christian movement from the beginning. They are there in the New Testament, and not surprisingly so, because all these things were part of Jewish worship, and the earliest Christians (including Christ himself) were Jewish through and through.

Furthermore, there are perfectly good biblical and theological reasons for the perseverance of these symbols in Christian worship. I've already spoken about priests. They were the elders of the Christian community. They were not CEOs or feudal lords. They were servant-leaders, who were put aside to oversee the development of Christ in the heart and soul of the community they served. Bishops are also present in the New Testament. They are like regional elders there, making sure that Christian life and witness is consistent across several congregations. Now while I agree that Constantinian Christianity, for several hundred years, indeed turned these biblical leaders into princes and feudal lords, this was certainly *not* how they functioned in early Christianity and neither do they function like that for most of the contemporary church. The Reformation did away with princely bishops, as did the 2nd Vatican Council in the Roman Catholic world. But they did not do away with priests and bishops altogether, because *they believed that such leaders were essential to the perseverance of the faith after the way of the apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture*. I am puzzled by Simson's claim that we can afford to do away, entirely, with this biblical pattern of leadership. More of that later.

Now to the "altar" that Simson is so scandalized by. Even in primitive house-church Christianity the *dining table* was understood as an altar. Yes, an altar. The logic of this cannot be faulted, I think. The dining table was the place where the bread and wine of the Lord's supper were broken and poured out. The church understood, from the beginning, that this breaking of Christ's body and pouring out of his blood was some kind of "sacrifice" by God for the sake of the world. Because an altar, in Jewish as well as Greek vocabularies, was a place of sacrifice, the table came to be understood, in a strictly symbolic manner, as the "altar" on which Christ's sacrifice was re/presented. The early church never claimed, of course, that the performance of the supper was a *literal* re-sacrificing of Christ (that came much later, in some of the more literalistic forms of Thomistic theology). The supper was, rather, an *anamnesis*—a ritual re/membering of Christ's life, death, resurrection and promised return—for the sake of a community that was trying to imitate Christ's sacrifice in its politics and way of life. "Altar" is a therefore a perfectly good word to describe the table on which the ritual *anamnesis* takes place.

Incense also had a Christian, and not only Jewish, pre-existence. The early Christian communities retained the Jewish use of incense in worship because it was able to symbolize spiritual realities that Christian could continue to believe in: for example, the prayers of the people rising to God; the way in which God's purposes are sometimes difficult to discern, hidden behind a cloud, as it were; the inclusion of God's people in a "cloud of witnesses" that stretches throughout all time and space; the presence of Christ's Spirit as a breath that is able to inhabit our most inward parts. I feel constrained to point out that incense is not only being used, today, by Roman, Anglican and Orthodox churches, but also by many Protestant communities. Indeed, it is becoming especially popular with some parts of the "emerging" church because of its sensitivity to bodily symbols in the "post-modern" imagination of younger people.

Thesis Three: the Third Reformation

> In rediscovering the gospel of salvation by faith and grace alone, Luther started to reform the Church through a reformation of theology. In the 18th century through movements like the Moravians there was a recovery of a new intimacy with God, which led to a reformation of spirituality, the Second Reformation. Now God is touching the wineskins themselves, initiating a Third Reformation, a reformation of structure.

There is an incredible twofold naivety here: (1) Simson writes as though there have been no serious reformations of church structures since the 15th and 16th centuries; there have—literally hundreds; (2) Simson assumes that one can reform one's theology without reforming the structures of the church. This is nonsense. A fundamental reformation of theology affects everything, because the whole of life—even buildings and worship symbols—both reflect and form one's theology. Structures and polities are *embodied theology*. All the great theological reformations have also been reformations of church structure and polity. There is even a name for the study of these things—ecclesiology.

Thesis Four: from House-Churches to house-churches

> Since New Testament times, there is no such thing as "a house of God". At the cost of his life, Stephen reminded unequivocally: God does not live in temples made by human hands. The Church is the people of God. The Church, therefore, was and is at home where people are at home: in ordinary houses. There, the people of God: share their lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, have "meatings," that is, they eat when they meet; they often do not even hesitate to sell private property and share material and spiritual blessings, teach each other in real-life situations how to obey God's word—dialogue—and not professor-style, pray and prophesy with each other, baptize, "lose their face" and their ego by confessing their sins, regaining a new corporate identity by experiencing love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Whew! There are so many questionable assertions in this paragraph that it is difficult to know where to begin. First, let me say that I agree entirely with Simson's

thesis that the household of God is primarily people, the people who actually practise the way of Christ. After that, I can agree with little else he has said. The assertion that early house-churches were not therefore understood as "houses of God" is absurd. Follow my logic here. As I have shown already, the New Testament communities said that Christ was most effectively present when the community gathered for worship. There, by attending to the Christ-symbols of word, sacrament and each other, the community learned how to discern, and work with, the mission of Christ's Spirit in the wider world. So, if God was most powerfully present in this gathering, this "household of God" (a distinctly New Testament phrase), it follows that the physical place where this household gathered could be understood as the very house of God. God is present where God's people, the "household of God", gather. So the physical place in which they gather—whether a house or not—can be legitimately called the "house of God". It's not that difficult really.

The reference to Stephen is therefore redundant. The passage in Acts about God not dwelling in temples made of human hands cannot be used as a proof-text for Simson's claims because (1) the text most likely refers to a metaphorical "temple", the religious practices of the Jewish nobility; (2) even if the text did, unequivocally, refer to bricks and mortar, that would not in any way undermine all that I've said about the house of God being the place in which the household of God, God's people, gather. Where God does not live in temples made of human hands it is largely because the *people* who gather there refuse to be God's household. They refuse to conform themselves to Christ's way and will in the world. You can't blame *that* kind of human failing on bricks and mortar. To do so is simply to displace and obfuscate the real issue: human sin. Human sin is human sin whether is happens in cathedrals or houses. How would meeting in houses rather than in parish churches have any bearing on whether we sinned or not? The New Testament was written to myriad Christian communities, many of which met in houses. What is clear from the record is that this fact apparently had little impact on their capacity to live the way of Christ. In most cases the apostles write their letters and books in order to address some human failing. Why would meeting in people's homes make it any easier for us to really practise the Christian faith? I've been meeting with fellow-Christians in their homes all my life, and I am still a sinner. They are too.

I'm also a little bemused about the reference to "dialogue" rather than "professor-style" teaching of the faith. Dialogue is a method of teaching amongst other methods of teaching. In a Christian context, it is particularly effective when the people gathered have already come to know and trust each other very well. Dialogue works where there is genuine trust and openness. Dialogue works where all of the participants feel safe enough to be corrected in what they say. The trouble is, I have never been part of a community where

this was absolutely the case. Most communities I have been part of included people who were not confident or secure in their relationship with others. Some harboured fears about being vulnerable. Others were afraid of being wrong, and therefore refused to accept the teaching of others. Some felt they were always right, the very font of God's knowledge, which (of course) was another way of showing they were afraid. Where there are people, there will be fears and sins. This will be the case whether one meets in a home for dialogue, or in a church building for dialogue. It will also be the case for a "professorial" monologue.

For my own money, I would see Christian education as neither a monologue nor a dialogue. The monologue assumes that there is only one who knows, the teacher. Dialogue assumes that we can teach each other, if only we are able to learn *all we really need* from each other. Trialogue, by contrast, assumes that we are all students and that there is one teacher, the Christ. If that is so, then no matter what kind of educational experience we set up, Christ must be consulted. How is that done? By reading the Bible on its own terms. By consulting biblical scholars and theologians, people who have given their lives over to a careful reflection on Christ's teaching. By talking with Christians beyond our own circle. Christ speaks in these larger places as well as in our own, small, place. Unless we are willing to competently access these *other* places of Christ's teaching, we are likely to come up with idiosyncratic or frankly heretical understandings that will ultimately endanger to health of our own community. Ironically, one of the traditional roles of the teaching 'elder', 'priest' or theologian has been to ensure that these *other* voices of Christ are actually heard within the local Christian conversation. But Simson doesn't seem to appreciate that.

Thesis Five: the church has to become small in order to grow big

> Most churches of today are simply too big to provide real fellowship. They have too often become "fellowships without fellowship". The New Testament Church was a mass of small groups, typically between 10 and 15 people. It grew not upward into big congregations between 20 and 300 people filling a cathedral and making real, mutual communication improbable. Instead, it multiplied "sideward"—like organic cells—once these groups reached around 15-20 people. Then, if possible, it drew all the Christians together into citywide celebrations, as with Solomon's Temple court in Jerusalem. The traditional congregational church as we know it is, statistically speaking, neither big nor beautiful, but rather a sad compromise, an overgrown house-church and an undergrown celebration, often missing the dynamics of both.

It is true that most of the (very) early churches were small. They were small for two reasons. First, as Simson says, because that made the building of community trust easier. But there is another reason why they were small at the beginning. The New Testament churches were persecuted churches, and persecuted churches do not meet in public places where they can be easily

targeted. For safety, they meet in houses (as in modern-day China or Burma), and houses can host only a small number of people for meals or worship. Now, as the Christian population grew larger, and Roman society became more tolerant of its existence, people began to build public worship centres that could hold more people. Why? For many good reasons: (1) there were too many new converts to teach within small groups alone; (2) local houses were becoming too full for everyone to participate in the full liturgical action of worship; (3) the mission of care and education being offered to the local community was growing with the number of people seeking these services; the numbers were such that they could no longer be run from private homes; (4) there was no longer any need to hide away from the public eye.

It is important to note that the church continued, even as it grew into larger public buildings, to encourage the formation of community within private homes. The "celebration" to which Simson refers, where all the small house-communities came together across a city from time to time, certainly took place in some places. In most, however, small house-groups were incorporated into much more local parish-church structures. The parish church was therefore the norm, rather than the exception, as early as the middle of the second century.

I see nothing wrong with the parish church model, as long as it continues to support plenty of community-building activity around meals and learning. Small house-groups are, of course, a fundamentally tried-and-true way of making sure that happens. Where people are allowed to attend a parish-wide gathering on Sundays without, at the same time, participating in the more nitty-gritty fortunes of a smaller group of people, I would personally be asking questions about whether such people are actually experiencing the fullness of communal Christianity, as the New Testament understands it. But that is not a competent argument against the appropriateness of the local parish church.

Thesis Six: no church is led by a Pastor alone

> The local church is not lead by a Pastor, but fathered by an Elder, a local person of wisdom and reality. The local house-churches are then networked into a movement by the combination of elders and members of the so-called five-fold ministries (Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Evangelists and Teachers) circulating "from house to house", whereby there is a special foundational role to play for the apostolic and prophetic ministries (Eph. 2:20 and 4:11-12). A Pastor (shepherd) is a very necessary part of the whole team, but he cannot fulfil more than a part of the whole task of "equipping the saints for the ministry", and has to be complemented synergistically by the other four ministries in order to function properly.

Simson seems unable to see that leadership, fatherhood and shepherdhood are all of a piece in Christian tradition. The origins of the New Testament concept of the "elder" (*presbyteros*, *episkopos*, also translated priest or bishop) are in the messianic passages about a king who

would come to "father" and "shepherd" a people dazed and confused by their experience of exile. In the image of Christ the shepherd-king—who leads, teaches and serves his people all at once—the early church found its model for eldership. The elder cannot, therefore, be fractured into separate ministries. The elder's ministry is an integrated whole. The elder is called by Christ, through the affirmation of the Christian community, to offer a servant-leadership in which the people are encouraged to imitate their elder's way of life, just as that elder imitates Christ himself. The elder leads in the sense of teaching the way of Christ through word and example. The elder leads by offering care and nurture. He/she does NOT lead by lording it over others or by trying to do every task on their own.

The ministry of eldership is crucial for the unity and apostolicity of the church, but that does not imply that the rest of the church does nothing. The lists of gifts and ministries in the New Testament (including the one cited by Simson) indicate that all Christians are given a calling and a ministry at their baptism. Simson's error is that he takes the list in Ephesians to define a five-fold *leadership* council that is eternally valid in every church, in every time. I know of no serious New Testament scholar who takes that view. Most say that the only permanent ministry of leadership is that of eldership—theological and pastoral oversight—of a particular community or group of communities. All the other gifts are given in diverse and rather different ways in diverse and different communities. The New Testament lists are themselves therefore specific to the local needs pertaining in the communities to which they were written.

Thesis Seven: the right pieces fitted together in the wrong way

> In doing a puzzle, we need to have the right original for the pieces, otherwise the final product, the whole picture, turns out wrong, and the individual pieces do not make much sense. This has happened to large parts of the Christian world: we have all the right pieces, but have fitted them together wrong, because of fear, tradition, religious jealousy and a power-and-control mentality. As water is found in three forms—ice, water and steam—the five ministries mentioned in Eph. 4:11-12, the Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers and Evangelists are also found today, but not always in the right forms and in the right places: they are often frozen to ice in the rigid system of institutionalized Christianity; they sometimes exist as clear water; or they have vanished like steam into the thin air of free-flying ministries and "independent" churches, accountable to no-one. As it is best to water flowers with the fluid version of water, these five equipping ministries will have to be transformed back into new—and at the same time age-old—forms, so that the whole spiritual organism can flourish and the individual "ministers" can find their proper role and place in the whole. That is one more reason why we need to return back to the Maker's original blueprint for the Church.

Simson seems very sure about what the Maker's original blueprint for the church is. But his New Testament scholarship

is extremely idiosyncratic. Ironically, he would like to freeze the leadership of the church into four distinct ministries. Even if this were the case in Ephesus (and no scholar I know reads Ephesians in this way), it is clear that other New Testament communities structured things rather differently. By the third century, the ministry of leadership had solidified into a minimalist form: theological and pastoral oversight or eldership. That left the rest of the church free to respond to the particularity of the Spirit's ever-new guidance about what kinds of ministry were necessary in each new missional situation.

Thesis Eight: God does not leave the church in the hands of bureacratic clergy

> No expression of a New Testament church is ever led by just one professional "holy man" doing the business of communicating with God and then feeding some relatively passive religious consumers Moses-style. Christianity has adopted this method from pagan religions, or at best from the Old Testament. The heavy professionalization of the church since Constantine has now been a pervasive influence long enough, dividing the people of God artificially into laity and clergy. According to the New Testament (1 Tim. 2:5), "there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus". God simply does not bless religious professionals to force themselves in-between people and God forever. The veil is torn, and God is allowing people to access Himself directly through Jesus Christ, the only Way. To enable the priesthood of all believers, the present system will have to change completely. Bureaucracy is the most dubious of all administrative systems, because it basically asks only two questions: yes or no. There is no room for spontaneity and humanity, no room for real life. This may be OK for politics and companies, but not the Church. God seems to be in the business of delivering His Church from a Babylonian captivity of religious bureaucrats and controlling spirits into the public domain, the hands of ordinary people made extraordinary by God, who, like in the old days, may still smell of fish, perfume and revolution.

Should the church be governed by a bureacratic clergy? Certainly not. Personally, I know of almost no clergy who are in it for the power or privilege (which are, in a secular society such as ours, pretty minimal anyway). Most experience ministry as an extremely difficult act of service which Christ has called them to, often against their own inclination or wish. Sure, there are people who get into leadership illegitimately. But that is usually because the rest of the church does not call them to account. Clergy are servant-leaders who enable the rest of the church to *become* the church, not civil servants or CEOs who can do whatever they wish. The clergy are not there to *get between* people and God, but to help people get to a place of *radical proximity* to the Spirit of Christ.

What Simson seems unable to see, is that all the historic Christian churches understand eldership in these terms. And I mean ALL of them. I'm not so confident when it comes to the churches that were born on the American frontier, but I am very confident of this fact

with regard to the Roman, Orthodox and Reformation churches. I know this because I have studied their theology, but also because I have great personal relationships with clergy from each of these traditions. I'm not sure that Simson is able to proceed on either of these bases.

Thesis Nine: return from organized to organic forms of Christianity

> The "Body of Christ" is a vivid description of an organic, not an organized, being. Church consists on its local level of a multitude of spiritual families, which are organically related to each other as a network, where the way the pieces are functioning together is an integral part of the message of the whole. What has become a maximum of organization with a minimum of organism has to be changed into a minimum of organization to allow a maximum of organism. Too much organization has, like a straight-jacket, often choked the organism for fear that something might go wrong. Fear is the opposite of faith, and not exactly a Christian virtue. Fear wants to control, faith can trust. Control, therefore, may be good, but trust is better. The Body of Christ is entrusted by God into the hands of steward-minded people with a supernatural charismatic gift to believe God that He is still in control, even if they are not. A development of trust-related regional and national networks, not a new arrangement of political ecumenism is necessary for organic forms of Christianity to reemerge.

I have a certain sympathy with this point of view. Certainly we must have local, regional and national expressions of church that relate to each other in a spirit of faith and trust, rather than fear. It is unclear, from this article, exactly how Simson might construct such relationships in real and organizational terms. In this Simson is not being (simply) naïve about the sociology of human organization, that organizational structures are necessary if one is seeking to gather people together according to a common vision and mission. He is also making a fundamental *theological* mistake in assuming that organism and organization are opposites. I would argue, on New Testament grounds, that the body of Christ—precisely because Christ is incarnate as flesh and blood, and does not merely hover around as a disembodied spirit—must always take an organizational and structural form. Of course, those forms need always to be open to the reforming movement of the Spirit. But it is a fundamental tenet of Christian belief that there is no such thing as a Spirit which addresses us apart from a specific sociological, indeed organizational, body. To prefer the term "organism" does not make any difference to this particular point. Organizations are, as any sociologist will tell you, essentially organic: they grow and change.

Thesis Ten: from worshipping our worship to worshipping God

> The image of much of contemporary Christianity can be summarized, a bit euphemistically, as holy people coming regularly to a holy place at a holy day at a holy hour to participate in a holy ritual led by a holy man dressed in holy clothes against a holy fee. Since this

> regular performance-oriented enterprise called "worship service" requires a lot of organizational talent and administrative bureaucracy to keep going, formalized and institutionalized patterns developed quickly into rigid traditions. Statistically, a traditional 1-2 hour "worship service" is very resource-hungry but actually produces very little fruit in terms of discipling people, that is, in changed lives. Economically speaking, it might be a "high input and low output" structure. Traditionally, the desire to "worship in the right way" has led to much denominationalism, confessionalism and nominalism. This not only ignores that Christians are called to "worship in truth and in spirit", not in cathedrals holding songbooks, but also ignores that most of life is informal, and so is Christianity as "the Way of Life". Do we need to change from being powerful actors to start "acting powerfully"?

I could write a whole article about the faulty theology in this paragraph, but I shall confine myself to the following. First, to understand tradition, particularly traditions of worship, as essentially rigid is to fundamentally misunderstand tradition. Tradition can only be itself by changing to address new circumstances. Tradition, as the pre-eminent authority on the matter has argued, is a constant and on-going re-negotiation between the old and the new.[2] Any worship that is really worship will therefore be an ever-new performance of an age-old gift: the story of the gospel. Worship that has its roots in the historic gift of the gospel in Christ, as well as in the Spirit-led mission of the church to ever-new places and times will always, therefore, be traditional. It will be ancient-future. Second, to see the weekly gathering of Christians for worship as (economically!) unfruitful is both (a) to displace a proper understanding of theological fruitfulness with a largely secular, economic, and consumerist paradigm; and (b) to miss the entire point of formal and ritual worship: to render glory to God according to the pattern and structure of the gospel itself. On this second point, I would argue that genuine Christian worship *needs* to have a particular ritual structure because the gospel itself has a structure. Rituals are embodied stories, and the ritual of Christian worship tells the story of the gospel. What we risk doing, in messing with the structured ritual, is messing with the gospel story itself. What happens, for example, if there is no moment of confession in worship? Perhaps this: that the gospel call for repentance begins to fade from the Christian repertoire of disciplines or practices. Note that word discipline. It is related to the word "disciple", which Simson rightly believes we are all called to be. What Simson fails to see is that worship, a ritual performance of the gospel story, actually models and rehearses the gospel practices we ought to be living out in the midst of our lives. Without worship, and ritual worship at that, we would forget that such practices need to be *practices*, that is, bodily performances, and not simply Gnostic-styled ideas that hover around in our brains but never come to earth.

A further point. To assume that ordinary, everyday, life is not formal

[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

but informal is quite wrong. Life is full of rituals. We depend on them to give order and meaning to our day, whether they be the rituals of when and how to eat, or the rituals of when and how to work, or the rituals of when and how to make love. All of these bodily practices have meaning precisely *because* they are performed stories. They are rituals, habits, and they give our lives meaning (though not always the meanings that the gospel would give us—thus the need for repentance and conversion).

Thesis Eleven: stop bringing people to church and start bringing the church to the people

> The church is changing back from being a Come-structure to being again a Go-structure. As one result, the church needs to stop trying to bring people "into the church," and start bringing the Church to the people. The mission of the Church will never be accomplished just by adding to the existing structure; it will take nothing less than a mushrooming of the church through spontaneous multiplication of itself into areas of the population of the world, where Christ is not yet known.

This is simply to separate what God intended to be together: worship and mission. In the New Testament, people were constituted as the church in gathered worship. There they learned, and re-learned, who God was, and who they were, and what their mission was. In worship (I repeat it again!) they rehearsed the "who", "what" and "why'" of their everyday mission in market, home, and society. Worship, for the New Testament, never ends. It flows *from* mission, *through* word and sacrament, then out *into* mission again. In this it imitates and mirrors the *missio dei* itself. The Son goes out from the Father and then returns to release the Spirit in whom the Father and the Son go out into the world once more. The movement is always both "go" and "come". Indeed, to underline the point historically, early Christian conversion was never considered adequate or complete unless that person learned, in the process, both how to worship *ritually* in the gathered community and how to worship *existentially* in the midst of the work-a-day world. Life as liturgy, liturgy as life.

Thesis Twelve: rediscovering the "Lord's Supper" to be a real supper with real food

> Church tradition has managed to "celebrate the Lord's Supper" in a homeopathic and deeply religious form, characteristically with a few drops of wine, a tasteless cookie and a sad face. However, the "Lord's Supper" was actually more a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning, than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning. God is restoring eating back into our meeting.

This is, again, both to obfuscate the historical origins of the Lord's Supper and to misunderstand its theological import. Historically, the supper was never simply an "ordinary meal" like the meals we enjoy in our private homes. It was, from the beginning, a ritual meal that told a story, the story of the gospel. Rituals tell stories in spare, symbolic, ways: thus the need to use smaller amounts of bread and wine to tell a story that is actually bigger than the anthropological meaning of any

"ordinary meal". This is how it was from the beginning (it is not a recent phenomenon!) That is not to say that the ritual meal did not take place in the midst of a "regular" meal. It did. But the meaning of the regular meal was re-configured by the performance of the ritual meal. The latter never, ever, stood alone. So let us return to "regular" meals in the midst of worship, by all means. But let's not throw away the ritual meal in doing so. If we do, the meaning of the supper will slowly be lost. Theologically, the supper dramatizes the story of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, as they deal with a lost humanity. It dramatizes our brokenness, and the brokenness of God in our brokenness, and the perseverance of God's love and faithfulness to us despite everything. The bread and wine symbolize, all at once, the Jewish memory of bitterness and liberation in Egypt, the death of God in Christ "for us", and the promise of a share in the supper-community of God when time and space are remade, from the beginning to the end, in justice and with peace. They are therefore portraits, in miniature, of the whole story of our salvation. That story *must* be told, and ritualized, over and over again, if we are to remain Christians who have faith, practise love, and face the future with hope.

Thesis Thirteen: from Denominations to city-wide celebrations.

> Jesus called a universal movement, and what came was a series of religious companies with global chains marketing their special brands of Christianity and competing with each other. Through this branding of Christianity most of Protestantism has, therefore, become politically insignificant and often more concerned with traditional specialties and religious infighting than with developing a collective testimony before the world. Jesus simply never asked people to organize themselves into denominations. In the early days of the Church, Christians had a dual identity: they were truly His church and vertically converted to God, and then organized themselves according to geography, that is, converting also horizontally to each other on earth. This means not only Christian neighbors organizing themselves into neighborhood- or house-churches, where they share their lives locally, but Christians coming together as a collective identity as much as they can for citywide or regional celebrations expressing the corporateness of the Church of the city or region. Authenticity in the neighborhoods connected with a regional or citywide corporate identity will make the Church not only politically significant and spiritually convincing, but will allow a return to the biblical model of the City-Church.

Ironically, this whole paragraph is an example of exactly the kind of competitive spirit that Simson condemns. Getting together with other Christians, particularly with those who see things a little differently than ourselves, has been a difficult task from the very beginning of the faith. Already, in the New Testament, there were "denominations", groups that followed different apostles and teachers of the faith. Although Paul asks that all Christians look to Christ as the beginning and end of it all, he nevertheless accepts that there will be permanent

differences amongst the brothers and sisters on some matters. Where these differences persevere, Paul asks only that the different "schools" continue to dialogue with one another respectfully, and to learn from Christ together. Which is exactly what the ecumenical movement, which involves most of the world's Christians, is all about. I personally enjoy deeply respectful relationships with Christians from other churches, and we are working together to realize a unity in Christ which goes significantly deeper than preferences about organizational forms.

The city-church model (Simson's own preferred organizational structure) is what catholic and orthodox Christianity calls the "diocese". The model is therefore present and active in most of the Christian world, and has been so for centuries. Simson seems entirely ignorant of this. What this demonstrates is a complete lack of ecumenical spirit. Simson is stuck within the vision of his own denominational tunnel, a tunnel that is loosely called the "free-church" or "evangelical" tradition. Clearly he neither knows nor understands other traditions; he has never bothered to listen, carefully, for what they might have to teach him. Rather, he stands safely at the edges, safe in his decidedly un-ecumenical tradition,[3] and slings accusations based not on sympathetic knowledge, but on hearsay and caricature. This is what I find *most* offensive in all these theses: this distinct lack of humility toward one's fellow-Christians.

[3] It is a tradition I know well, having grown up within it and studied its origins and theology at a tertiary level.

Thesis Fourteen: developing a persecution-proof spirit

> They crucified Jesus, the Boss of all the Christians. Today, his followers are often more into titles, medals and social respectability, or, worst of all, they remain silent and are not worth being noticed at all. "Blessed are you when you are persecuted", says Jesus. Biblical Christianity is a healthy threat to pagan godlessness and sinfulness, a world overcome by greed, materialism, jealousy and any amount of demonic standards of ethics, sex, money and power. Contemporary Christianity in many countries is simply too harmless and polite to be worth persecuting. But as Christians again live out New Testament standards of life and, for example, call sin as sin, conversion or persecution has been, is and will be the natural reaction of the world. Instead of nesting comfortably in temporary zones of religious liberty, Christians will have to prepare to be again discovered as the main culprits against global humanism, the modern slavery of having to have fun and the outright worship of Self, the wrong centre of the universe. That is why Christians will and must feel the "repressive tolerance" of a world which has lost any absolutes and therefore refuses to recognize and obey its creator God with his absolute standards. Coupled with the growing ideologization, privatization and spiritualization of politics and economics, Christians will—sooner than most think—have their chance to stand happily accused in the company of Jesus. They need to prepare now for the future by developing a persecution-proof spirit and an even more persecution-proof structure.

I could say "Amen" to almost all of this if I didn't detect, at the very heart of Simson's spirituality, a basic capitulation to modern, Western culture. Simson says we must obey Christ, no matter what the trends and fashions of our culture, yet his theology (ironically) reflects modern, western, cultural trends rather more than it reflects Christ. The central place he gives the family, for example, is simply not there in early Christianity. If you read the gospels carefully, you will find that Jesus was constantly getting into trouble for preaching *against* the pre-eminence of clan and tribe that was very much part of his own Jewish culture. For Jesus, the duty to look out for your family's economic and social interests actually got in the way of the kingdom of God. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was actually a larger commonwealth, in which the private interests of individual families were put aside for the sake of justice for all.[4] Similarly, Simson's focus on the small house or family-based church realizes is a perfect expression, I think, of modernity's insistence that the only authority to which we must answer is the authority of ourselves or that of the people who agree with us. Early Christianity insisted that the opposite was true. Against the tendency of individuals or churches to go there own way and do their own thing, they insisted that the will of Christ could only be discerned through a permanent concilliar process by which churches met with each other to discern the truth together. The creeds that arose from the Council of Nicaea and defined orthodox Christianity are the pre-eminent example of what concilliar Christianity can do. Against that, there are many small churches today (and I suspect that Simson is a member of one of them) that redefine the faith in ways that betray a basic lack of respect for the history and theology of the rest of the church. Christ, I would argue, comes to us first in word and sacrament, and then in the common wisdom of the historic and apostolic church as it confers with itself in various councils. Simson, it seems, is part of a movement that is actually *ultra-modern* in that it wants to separate itself from historic Christianity and follow a new version of the gnostic impulse. In all this and more, I submit, Simson proposes a theology that that is more modernist than Christian.

Thesis Fifteen: the church comes home

> Where is the easiest place, say, for a man to be spiritual? Maybe again, is it hiding behind a big pulpit, dressed up in holy robes, preaching holy words to a faceless crowd and then disappearing into an office? And what is the most difficult—and therefore most meaningful—place for a man to be spiritual? At home, in the presence of his wife and children, where everything he does and says is automatically put through a spiritual litmus test against reality, where hypocrisy can be effectively weeded out and authenticity can grow. Much of Christianity has fled the family, often as a place of its own spiritual defeat, and then has organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. As God is in

[4] For more on this, see my homily on "Conversion: Unplugging from the Matrix" at deverell.net/unplugging_matrix.html.

> the business of recapturing the homes, the church turns back to its roots—back to where it came from. It literally comes home, completing the circle of Church history at the end of world history.

What else can I say? This is reductionist nonsense! To caricature so unfavourably the ministry of many millions of faithful Christian elders, is, in the end, completely counter-productive. There is no evidence here of having taken the time to learn, for example, *why* so many clergy (myself included) wear robes at worship. Neither do many of us preach from behind big pulpits which place us "nine feet above contradiction". That happened far more in the Reformation than it does now. And why does he think that our congregations are faceless crowds? They are not. I know the names of everyone in my congregation. I have been to their homes, and I have prayed and worked with them in our very counter-cultural community called "the church". And why does he think that we are all running away from our families? Some are, sure. But most of us are not. On the contrary, we are engaged in a new family enterprise: to share what we have with a wider family, a family in which we gain ourselves by losing ourselves. So much of what Simson says about the family betrays a rather untheological assumption that "family first" is the answer to all our social and political problems. It is not. "Family first" means, in most cases, that our responsibilities towards community and society (those who are different to us, not our blood, what the New Testament calls "the neighbour"), are given away altogether.

Conclusion

Enough said. Let me conclude by clarifying what I believe to be the essential strengths and weaknesses of the "alt worship" movement as it is represented by Simson. The movement's emphasis on worshipping God in body (as well as mind), with the whole range of our senses and capacity for relationship engaged, is very laudable. That approach not only engages the hearts and minds of many searching souls, but it also returns to worship a genuine sense of the "word becoming flesh" and "dwelling among us". Still, for all their bodily creativity and contemporary sensibility, alternative worship events are very often guilty of failing to tell a genuinely *Christian* story about the world, about ourselves, and about God. While such events may therefore qualify as wonderful opportunities for the creation of community or, indeed, of dazzlingly communicative rituals, their identity as acts of C*hristian worship* remain open to question in many instances.

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op. cit.

Sandy Yule

A Response to Paul Tonson

"The Significance of the Multifaith Environment" (CP Issue 16)

There is much to commend and support in Paul Tonson's paper, "The Significance of the Multifaith Environment (MFE) for the Christian Confession of Faith and Mission". We should unreservedly commend his practice in providing seminars for schools through the Jews, Christians and Muslims Association (JCMA), as he describes it. We should also agree with his general rationale for this practice, as I read him, which is that we live in a multifaith environment and that this should be seen as a good gift from God rather than as evidence of human faithlessness and sin. His appeal to the Old Testament[1] I find thoroughly persuasive (and refreshingly orthodox). I would even support his apologetic stance of not leading with our most obnoxiously distinctive doctrines in interfaith engagement, though our conversation partners will usually call us to give account of these traditional matters if they really care about dialogue (and more on this later). He presents a fine account of his sense of calling into interfaith co-operation.

Where I find room for further discussion is in relation to the large questions introduced by the title of the paper. Paul Tonson makes a good case for a positive acceptance of the MFE as a "given" for our Christian self-understanding and practice. But is this no more than a sociological fact that we should deplore but accept as a given? Is it, as some would argue, a sign that not every knee acknowledges Christ, requiring us to redouble our efforts for mass conversion? Or is it, as Paul suggests, a positive gift from God for the restoration of the brokenness of the world? This is worth asking explicitly because this latter suggestion opens the way to further important questions. How should Christians recognize value in faiths other than Christianity? Indeed, how should Christians recognize value in the various forms of Christian faith other than that in which we were personally formed? It seems to me that the general form of an acceptable answer would be the discernment that religions have value in assisting

[1] I prefer to continue our traditional designation rather than use one of the modern alternatives, on the understanding that it is unacceptably ageist to regard "old" as a pejorative term and that supersecessionism is not necessarily implied by the term "New Testament".

communities and individuals to turn to God, with consequent beneficial changes to their lives.

For us in the UCA, the prime question to which the *Basis of Union* was offered as an answer was, "What is the faith of the church?" It was assumed that even if we humans could not expect a definitive answer to this question before Christ's second coming in glory, the question itself made sense. I suggest that we need to recover a sense that our theological thinking should be ecumenical, meaning that it is conducted in the company of the whole church and—at least implicitly—the whole world. I believe that we should affirm that faithfulness to Christ requires of us an openness to co-operation and dialogue with all people and all traditions, much as Paul Tonson suggests,

In Christian understanding, God is One, and God is living. Christian mission does not make sense if it is not based upon an attempt to join in with the pre-existing mission of God. God calls us before we call upon God. Similarly, God is One, but our human ideas of God are many. The reality of God is served by faithful human witness, but it cannot be said to be dependent upon human witness. Our ideas of God become more faithful as we attend to the truth in the witness of other human traditions and other individual voices.

Does the mission of God aim at a situation in which every person in the world is a Christian?[2] Many Christians think that the answer to this question has to be "Yes", as "being saved" is equated with "being Christian". I believe that it is proper to think that the answer is "No". Christian faith should be seen as a special calling from God for explicit partnership in God's redemptive work rather than as a secure destination, an achieved heavenly reward. This understanding leaves room for a positive role for religions other than Christian in God's universal mission.

The identification of salvation with being a Christian goes back to the old belief that there was no hope of salvation outside the Christian church.

> Is there any formula more well known than "Outside the Church there is no salvation"? It would not be difficult to find equivalents in the New Testament; but it is found for the first time in its present form, two examples of it at the same moment, about the year 250, on the pen of two confessors of the faith whom one cannot know without loving, Origen at Alexandria and St. Cyprian at Carthage. Applying the words to people who live after Christ's coming, they mean them in an absolute, exclusive sense.'[3]

Congar points out that this belief depends upon the understanding that there is no salvation except through Jesus Christ. "There is salvation in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Rather than accept at the Christian Conference of Asia Assembly in 2005. His answer was "No", along the lines that I am setting out here.

[2] This question was asked by Fr. Tom Michel at a workshop on interfaith dialogue

[3] Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), 95.

that an affirmation of pluralism requires the denial of the teaching of texts such as this, Congar seeks another resolution. "The whole question turns on this point: is there or is there not another way of honouring the principle of the oneness of the mediator of salvation?"[4] His answer is that not only is there another way, but that this traditional exclusivist understanding is itself excluded by official Roman Catholic teaching.

> Catholic theology has kept the formula "Outside the Church…", but it must be recognized that it is now given a sense very different from that of its originators, Origen and St. Cyprian. … Briefly, it is no longer a question of applying the formula to any concrete person whatever, but of stating objectively that the Church of Christ is commissioned and qualified to carry salvation, brought by Jesus Christ, to *all* men *(sic)*; and that she alone, as Christ's Church, is so commissioned and qualified. So the formula is no longer to be regarded as answering the question "*Who* will be saved?" but as answering the question "What is it that is commissioned to discharge the ministry of salvation?"[5]

There is much room for further discussion of what this teaching means and implies. It seems to me to be important and helpful teaching in confirming that salvation is of God and that we humans are not given to know its mysteries before the appointed time. It is also helpful in affirming the pivotal role of the church in the salvation of the world without premature glorification of the church. Our present Christian knowledge and experience is not worthless and does play a part in our salvation and that of others. We believe ourselves to be part of Christ's church and therefore part of the divinely created means for the realization of salvation for us and for all. Can we then go on to think that we are of use to God through our loving openness to all the "others" whom we encounter and that positive relationships are central to the inclusion of finite human beings in the very life of the trinitarian God whom we know through Christ?

If we can think this, it would seem to open up the possibility that God is even now at work in many other traditions and experiences which Christian faith can now recognize as valuable realizations of community in which the Holy Spirit of God is not absent. This is not a matter upon which we are called to judge in any abstract and general way, but we are called to judge who and what we welcome into our own circle. Friendship leads to sharing, which would seem to be of God. There is a blessing in finding new friends, even as we know that there can be testing times when friends seem to go astray or turn away from us in our hour of need. I believe that, as Christians, we should have sharing and friendship as our default position, which we maintain until there is reason to do otherwise.

On this understanding, Christian faith is seen as a special calling, similar to the calling of individual prophets. The focus of God's redemptive purpose can be seen as the formation of loving persons living in loving community. This should be what people see when

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 98.

they encounter the life of the Christian Church. The goal of this loving communion has been ultimately revealed to be an incorporation into the very life of the Triune God. In the gracious providence of God, all communities and persons have some share, however partial, in this spiritual fullness. The special calling of Christians is to follow the way of Jesus, for which this is the main game. Christians are called to conscious and intentional discipleship in this way.

The consequences of this discussion for our attitude towards our present multi-faith environment seem reasonably clear. We are free to leave the judgements and the reality of final salvation to God, an attitude compatible with the clear teachings that we have inherited, that there is a salvation for which to hope and that there is God as the agent and judge of this salvation. We are free to approach all whom we meet in the hope of achieving an open and ultimately loving communication, despite the immense barriers of culture, race, class and psychological damage. We are free to hope for the revelation of good will even from our enemies when we do approach them in this open way. The potential for rejection and suffering is obviously great when we go out into our damaged world in this open spirit. Yet it seems clear to me that this is nothing other than the way of the cross.

If we are proselytizing, it is for the practice of the gospel values of love, forgiveness, truth, peace and justice, not for others to become like us and join our organization. It is not easy to maintain this open stance when others operate less openly, so that we cannot avoid facing difficult and at times murky choices about what to do. Yet it seems clear that we should be affirming the general right of others to define their own religious and social identities with the assistance of our respect and that of the wider society, which implies that we have some responsibility also to support and influence this wider acceptance.

"If we are proselytizing, it is for the practice of the gospel values of love, forgiveness, truth, peace and justice, not for others to become like us and join our organization."

Yet it is insufficient to pretend that we can maintain this open attitude without extraordinary help. How can we avoid seeing how naked and vulnerable we become when we let our defences down? This is where I believe that we need to maintain a strong version of Christian faith in the God who strengthens the fainthearted and brings the dead to newness of life. It is precisely because God is that we find the possibility of

radical openness to "the other". We bear witness to the truth and grace of God most fully by living in the power of truth and love, as forgiven sinners. This is a matter which goes beyond the possibilities inherent in verbal witness, important as this can be. We can note the relative silence of Jesus on his way to death. Love does not remove us from vulnerability and potential suffering. Indeed, it often seems to pitch us into the middle of both. Yet Christian experience, time and again, tells of the surprising strength that can come in support as we follow this path. Perhaps the real giftedness to be found in the reality of our multi-faith environment is the pressure that it brings on us to depend upon God for guidance and discernment in living within the radical openness that it provides.

This brings me to the one point of potential tension that I have found with what Paul Tonson has written. I see no need to disown traditional theological doctrines such as the two natures of Christ because I believe that a proper understanding of them confirms and supports the open and loving stance that Paul and I are promoting. Believing that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, is indeed the key broad belief here. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is an ancient attempt to make sense of this core belief (or should we say experience here?). Finding acceptably modern language to present this core belief is indeed highly desirable for apologetic purposes, but I see no need to regard this as a forced choice, "either the modern explanation or the ancient one", as Paul seems to suggest. We should be looking for the empowerment of faith in which we can enter into open dialogue, not only with sympathetic Jews and Muslims, but also with conservative Christians, thus becoming more competent as bridge builders between communities that suffer from centuries-old separations and misunderstandings. We need each other in this communal bridge building and I conclude by reiterating my appreciation for Paul Tonson's significant contribution to this through the JCMA and through his reflections on our multifaith environment.

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double take

Hilary Howes

Graeme Harrison

Resurrection of the Metanarrative?

a response to David Merritt

"Little Peter Rabbit had a fly upon his nose!" This was the song that greeted me when I started at a new school in grade 1. The children would sing the song repeatedly and after each repetition they would remove a phrase until the last time they would sing the entire song without saying any of the words. When I arrived they were halfway through this new song and I could not figure out how the song went. I was sat down in the class and invited to join in. Whenever a gap in the song appeared I would say random words aloud in the silence but it was obvious that the other children all knew what was supposed to be in those gaps.

A stranger walking into a Western mainline Protestant congregation today is likely to have a similar experience as they learn how "the Christian story" or metanarrative goes. They would hear a story with bewildering gaps that everyone seems to know and avoid. The gaps are centred around those parts of the story dealing with the "saviour from sin", the "sacrificial death" on the cross, and the role of the church. We are silent, awkward and/or apologetic in our liturgies when the scriptures, the sacraments, and the church calendar insist on repeatedly focussing on them. I am among those who are concerned but not, however, embarrassed about these parts of the Christian metanarrative.

How can this be when I agree with many of the things that David Merritt condemned in his article "Alternatives to Traditional Christian Thought" (*CP* 13):

> The emphasis on sin warps our view of life…to personalize the story of evil is both to trivialize the issues and to distract us from the great challenges to human societies.

Such questions compelled me to research the disappearance of sin in the church and Western society, and its consequences, through a Master of Ministry. This led me to an interesting place. I have found Merritt's critique of sin and salvation to be fairly accurate, and yet still find the general metanarrative of Scripture credible. How do I resolve this?

My research led me to discover that modern Western Protestant thought had taken on the culture of the Enlightenment and placed the

autonomous individual at the centre of a *rewritten* metanarrative/gospel. My approach here will focus on "story" and narrative rather than propositional doctrines as I find it to be closer in approach to many of the scripture writers.

In the scriptures, the metanarrative[1] is communal, and speaks of this "generation" (Acts 2:40, Mark 8:12, 38, etc.), "the Kingdom of God" (variations used 162 times in the New Testament), the church as "the body of Christ"(1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4). Salvation brings together into one, communities that were broken apart (Eph. 2:11-16). Salvation transfers people, from one people to another, as they become "citizens"(Eph. 2:19). "The world" also is not a physical description, but a shorthand way of describing the community, which lives without God, and has upside-down values in its treatment of people when compared with the kingdom of God (it is used negatively in most of the 185 NT instances). In Paul, the church plays the same role as the kingdom of God in the metanarrative as he tells it. Upside-down values are defined in relation to the "world's" values. For example: "The one who leads must serve" (Mark 10:43-44); "The first shall be last and the last first" (Luke 13:30); "Blessed are you who are poor. Yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you, who are rich. You have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:20, 24); "Love your enemy" (Matt. 5:44); "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35); "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:25ff); "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34); "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart soul and mind" (Matt. 22:37); etc.

So let's see what the gospel metanarrative without the Protestant Enlightenment rewrite might look like.

God creates humanity in love and harmony with God; the community of humanity *de facto* rejects God as it chooses self-determination, and therefore loses harmony with God, one another, and the creation. The human community turns on itself and successively breaks down into smaller communities of self-protection against other communities along the lines of race, locality, language, family, wealth, slave/free, and gender. The relationship between communities can vary from violence to tolerance, but it is no longer loving and harmonious. Humanity as a whole is now dysfunctional, dangerous and divided. It is characterized by endless wars, division and oppression. This "world" is incapable of transforming itself. Languages and cultures vary, but they all bear the hallmarks of "the world". God establishes a community called "Israel" to learn God's way, Torah, and be a light to the world (Gen. 12:1-4). But the Old Testament testifies that this community's behaviour appears little different to other gentile communities; a new covenant is required to bring real change (Jer. 31:31-34).

[1] Each New Testament author has their own metanarrative but the points of commonality are so great as to allow us to speak more broadly of an overarching metanarrative.

In the metanarrative, the size of the problem/sin is enormous, and the need for a saviour palpable. The ravaging of God's children, by God's children (as communities of violence) across the planet demands justice, restoration and reconciliation. Jesus Christ achieves all three simultaneously, through his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. He becomes one with the human community, and assumes representative status of the whole or broken human community (John 3:16, 2 Cor. 5:19, Mark 10:45). His death meets the demands of justice.[2] At the same time, his death reveals what the human community has become (Acts 2:36): killers of the innocent, killers of their creator. Most people present for Peter's accusation were not individually present 50 days earlier for Jesus' trial but nevertheless they understood the truth that the accusation was about the community of Israel of which they were a part; the community killed Christ not the individuals or even a segment identified as oppressors.[3] At the same time, Jesus' death and resurrection reveal who God is; the one who passionately loves us in an outrageous display of love for the community that is killing him.

His resurrection declares, the new community of the kingdom of God is unstoppable by "the world". And is a real alternative human community.

For those who want to join this kingdom of God community the entrance requirements are simple:

1. Repent. This means to dump the values of your old community "the world", and embrace the new community and its values.
2. Believe in Christ. This is not so much about assenting to beliefs and doctrines but more about entrusting oneself to Jesus Christ as "a little child".
3. Receive the Holy Spirit, who achieves the complete reconciliation of the lost homecoming child and waiting Father. "…and by him, we cry, 'Abba, Father', the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom. 8:15-16). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit adds God's power to our own to facilitate changed behaviour in the new community/kingdom of God/church. The church's role is to be this community and to preach this communal salvation in Christ and to love the world with

[2] Justice is a high concept that honours the suffering of the victims of crime by seeking redress from the perpetrator. Many ministers treat justice as a disposable concept in Christian theology, while simultaneously calling for war criminals and presidents to be brought to justice for crimes against humanity! Sin and justice have often been trivialized by Protestant Enlightenment theologies but more on that later.

[3] In the same way that I am part of the community of the global village which is guilty of the deaths of children every 30 seconds from preventable causes by its failure to act. I have never "allowed" the death of anyone as an individual but my community that I love and live in, is responsible. Often we pretend that being non-violent as an individual means we do not participate in the violence, but the shame I felt at Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and the joy I felt when our Prime Minister said "Sorry" reveals a deeper truth. Would our community, the global village, crucify Jesus today?

outrageous passion, like Jesus Christ does. If the church forgets who she is in the gospel story what would we/she be good for (Matt. 5:13)?

Syncretism

Sometimes, the church takes the culture of its day, and disastrously reworks the gospel story to include it. David Merritt reminds us of this by referring to the time when Augustine and the church of his time confused sex and sin. Here the gospel was syncretized with Plato's philosophy that all matter is corrupt, and a hindrance to the pure life of the ideal/spirit. Similarly, the Protestant church syncretized the Enlightenment notion of the supremacy of the autonomous individual with Christianity.[4] How was the story reworked? Something like this:

Two individuals, Adam and Eve, rebelled against God. God kicked them out of Paradise, and thus their offspring ended up reaping what their parents had sowed. The following generations autonomously (and mysteriously, seeing Protestants didn't believe in original sin) chose sin for themselves. God was angry at the declining state of the world. Every individual in the world therefore deserved the punishment of hell forever. But Enlightenment Christians noted that not everyone sins equally, so how can each individual get the same judgement?

Easy! Perfection is expected as the norm for each person, so it doesn't matter if you lead a good life and only tell one little white lie; God will justly punish you for eternity. Franklin Graham actually said this at an evangelistic rally at Telstradome three years ago! But Jesus Christ takes the punishment for all the white lies, the war, etc., and so saves us from the human problem; which is not sin but God's wrath against sin. But to receive this peace with God, we need to *confess* (i.e. say sorry for all the things we have individually done—we've got to mean it, so it helps if you feel guilty), *believe in Jesus Christ* (remember, if you don't mean it then it won't work—belief is seen as rational and propositional), and *receive the Holy Spirit*.

Note, what has happened when the autonomous individual lies at the heart of the scriptural meta-narrative:

1. The gospel has God, and his wrath, which we will see at our personal death, as the core problem for individuals.
2. There is therefore a shift in focus to the "next life".
3. Sin is trivialized as a problem, and it loses its edge as a concept with anything useful to say to the human condition. As we groan under the weight of unjust relationships in the global village in economics, politics, endless wars of terror, overpopulation, environmental degradation, consumerism, self-centredness, rape and AIDS, etc., God is wagging his finger at you for telling a white lie. Where sin is trivialized as a concept, then so is God.
4. Jesus' salvation becomes dependent not on the cross and resurrection, but on

[4] Two books proved helpful here: Dean Drayton, *Which Gospel* (Unley: Mediacom, 2005), 25-43, and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994), 231-238.

the individual's emotions and doctrinal assent. He/she must feel guilty, must personalize the story, and must assent to correct doctrinal statements. Salvation has a whole lot of preconditions attached.

5. Changed behaviour is not essential to this Enlightenment version of the gospel. Many churches today wonder why all the surveys turn up the same results; that born-again Christians live no differently to the world around them. The reason is plain: the Enlightenment gospel does not include it as the point of the rewritten story. Changed lives and a changed world are optional extras.

6. Sin is redefined as an individual's actions. Gone is the concept that a whole community may be "off the rails", despite most of its members trying to lead good private lives.[5]

7. The church is no longer central to the story. Her role is reduced to merely being the one who provides the opportunity for the individual to make their decision. To this day people demonstrate they have no idea what the church is for when they say "you don't have to go to church to be a Christian".

People such as Merritt rightly reject this Enlightenment rewrite as incredible and irrelevant to the enormous problem humanity faces in itself. But where he uncritically assumes that the last syncretistic *rewrite* is faithful to the scriptural metanarrative, I do not.

The communal nature of the scriptural metanarrative rings true to the real world that I see and live in. The solution to the human race's condition centred on an alternative Christ community not only makes perfect sense but inspires my mind and fills my heart with the deepest of yearnings, just as it did 35 years ago, when Jesus Christ and his kingdom of God were first described to me. I knew I lived in a messed up world but I only knew how good it could be when I found Christ. This is God's revealing nature: in Christ is life, death and resurrection. He reveals who we are, what we can become, and the passionate love of God that will get us there.

What is Sin?

A final word about *sin*. I discovered through my research that the scriptures' various notions of sin had been reduced to the Enlightenment notion of bad actions done by an individual. The badness of the actions were defined in a *modern* way, either as against the bible's set of rules or societies' agreed rules (e.g. Christian values or human rights). Postmodern society does not agree that there is one set of rules and therefore speaking of sins at all sounds like the arrogant imposition of one subculture's values onto another. This is seen as very *un-Australian*, and therefore your average Christian has ceased to use the term sin at all. This is inevitable, and perhaps desirable until we can resurrect a more useful content of the term sin.

If we are to share this Christ story with the wider Australian community perhaps

[5] Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book on this very matter of how good Christian individuals create immoral societies when together as a community. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribners, 1932).

we could do no better than follow John's lead in his gospel. The description of the human condition does not derive from rules but from contrast with the person of Jesus. Rather than starting as many evangelical Enlightenment Christians do with sin—the bad news of all the rules we have broken—then moving to the good news of how Jesus Christ solved our "wrath of God problem", we should start with the person of Jesus. The space he moves and lives in is overflowing with love that ignores the boundaries of gender, race and religion, social status, etc. His is a "big love" that *contrasts* with the little loves of all those he meets; much as light contrasts with darkness (John 1:7, 3:19-21). He really does love the whole world whereas everyone else has a small love limited to their sub community (Samaria, Judea, Pharisees, family, etc.). Humanity does not lack love, it is full of passionate love for "us" that does not include "them". It is in the *contrast* between Jesus and the "world" that we discover sin, and it seems to focus not on rule breaking but upon how small our love is.

Sin is not lack of love or breaking rules, it is small love. Salvation is leaving the world of small tribal loves and entering Jesus' community of unbounded love. That is also why John says Jesus is "the way", because the new community is inseparable from the person of Jesus. I love Jesus' new community!

I also love this gospel story, because anyone can join; idiots, professors, philanthropists, and war criminals. It doesn't require us to do spiritual disciplines to receive it, or a theology degree to comprehend it, nor goodness to achieve it, nor church membership to attain it. Jesus says "Come!", and we leave our community and join his new community just as we are: but we won't stay that way for long with him around!

Graeme Harrison has just concluded his ministry at Ashburton UC, and is about to commence at Living Faith Church Greensborough, a combined UCA/Church of Christ congregation.

what are you reading?

John Vander Reest

Calvin and the Ecumenical Movement

This year a new publication appeared in the Netherlands celebrating the 500th birth year of Calvin, exploring different aspects of his inheritance.[1] In this article I have concentrated on Calvin and church unity.

The Calvinist or Reformed denominations are generally not known for their unity. Usually they are equated with those who stand for schism and the multiplication of denominations, as it happened after the Reformation in Europe. It was in 1536, as Calvin was travelling from France to Basel in Switzerland and came through Geneva, that the reformer Farel asked Calvin to stay and help to reform the city. Geneva was at that time a centre for refugees of religious persecution. What persuaded Farel to ask Calvin was not only Calvin's major work, the *Institutes*, which had just been published, but also a letter to King Francis I of France, in which Calvin pleaded for the acceptance of the Calvinistic movement as part of the renewal of the one catholic and apostolic church.[2] In it, Calvin explains that he wrote the *Institutes* to show the King and those opposed to the Reformation movement that he did not want a break with the Church of Rome, that the followers of the Reformation were not like the Anabaptists and ought not to be looked at as sectarian and schismatic.

From the beginning, Calvin hoped to keep the renewal and reformational movement within the boundaries of the Catholic Church. This, unfortunately, did not happen, and in 1544 the Council of Trent decided, without the presence of the Protestants, that the schism had become irreversible.

Calvin had a deep respect for Martin Luther and often corresponded with him. And when Luther became, at times, too exuberant and too sharp, he would write to Melanchthon and ask him to temper Luther in his language. Calvin was more conciliatory than Luther. This does not mean, however, that Calvin could not be sharp himself, as he demonstrated in his reply to the Council of Trent, "The Antidote against the Decisions of Trent".[3]

[1] B. Plaisier, "Calvijn en de Eenheid van de Kerk, Bijeenbrengen van het Verstrooide [Calvin and the Unity of the Church, the Bringing Together of the Despora]", in *Calvijn na 500 jaar [Calvin after 500 years: A publication of the The General Synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands]*, ed. W. de Greef and M. van Campen (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009). The translations of quotations in this article are my own.

[2] Jean Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 9.

[3] Plaisier, 202.

Calvin was a prolific writer of letters to contacts in high places all over Europe. He worked hard in order to establish unity between Lutherans and Zwinglians. Also well known is his letter to King Sigismund of Poland, which indicates that Calvin did not, in principle, have any objections to the episcopate. "It could be that at the head of the of kingdom of Poland an archbishop would take his place, not in order to dominate, but to promote order, to be the moderator in synods and to encourage unity amongst the colleagues and brothers". He saw the office of bishop having a twofold task, namely the promotion of unity and that of pastoral care.

In this regard his letters to Thomas Cranmer are also interesting. His hope was to reform the English church, and when Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury suggested an ecumenical council to discuss points of teaching, but also to bring more unity amongst the various sections of the Reformation, Calvin became very enthusiastic. In April 1552 he stated: "I personally would sacrifice for this to happen and if I am summoned I would cross ten oceans in order to attend".[4] However, Melanchton and Bullinger were not quite ready and it would take many centuries before anything like this was to happen.

Right from its inception, the Calvinist movement was an international and ecumenical movement It was also a "contextual" movement, in that Calvin realized that the many different groups in many different countries, under different rulers, could adjust to their own particular situation, style and church government. From this was born the principle *Cuius regio, huius religio*, which means: "the religion of a country is that of the one who exercises authority in it, that is the prince or council".[5] And Calvin had no problems with this, allowing them their own character and situation. As a reformer he was ahead of his time in more ways than one. For instance he made a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith. In the first group he included the belief in the Triune God, Christ, etc. In the second group he left greater freedom in respect to liturgical form, the way women were clothed and the like. And because of the great diversity amongst the various groups he stressed that the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments increase the unity of the Church. Calvin had no problem with the axiom of diversity in unity and unity in diversity. In many of his letters he pleaded for greater tolerance towards each other and a better acceptance of each other as all belonging to the "Body of Christ".

In the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, after 43 years of work towards reunification, Lutherans and Calvinists have come together, as well as several branches of the Reformed Churches. Calvin would have rejoiced, even though it took more than 500 years to happen.

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[4] Ibid., 209.

[5] Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered*, trans. O. R. Johnston (London: IVF, 1960), 80.

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on Areopagus Hill

Lorraine Parkinson
responds on multifaith

Bob Faser
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Avril Hannah-Jones
through a glass darkly

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