



Congregations as *Koinonia*: The First Steps Toward Recovering the Dynamics of New Testament Communities

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The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry project was twofold, namely, a practical project for members of two linked congregations in rural Aberdeenshire and, from my own perspective as minister of Word and Sacrament in these congregations, the opportunity to reflect on some of the related theological, biblical and ministerial concepts. We focus mainly on the second of these prefaced by a very short overview of the associated practical project.



Associated Practical Project

During discussion of *Decline or Change?*, the Kirk Sessions and members of the congregations in which I was minister of Word and Sacrament reached the conclusion that we needed to re-consider how we 'be' and 'do' what we are called 'to be' and 'to do' as Christ's Church in the rapidly changing culture of the twenty-first century. This should better enable us to find ways to create 'touching points for mission' in our local communities which in turn could lead to opportunities to renew the invitation to the people in these communities 'to come' and 'join us'.

After prayerful reflection, we eventually agreed that the objective of the *first step* would be to seek an understanding of the 'dynamics' of New Testament Communities. The hope was that this would enable movement toward fulfilment of the larger, longer term vision that saw us as pro-active communities of loving relationships called by God, in the changed and changing culture and society of the twenty-first century: ... to be with him, *and* to be sent out to proclaim the message, *and* to have authority to cast out demons.¹

In the New Testament the Greek word that describes Christian communities with such a vision is *koinonia* with the unique activity of these communities summed up in the Greek words *kerygma* and *diakonia*. In this tentative *first step* therefore, we sought to discover ‘the essence’ of these three words in the context of the New Testament together with reflection on how what we discovered related to our own situation.² This was achieved through nine week-night reflection sessions together with corresponding themes in Sunday worship during the period from the first Sunday in Lent to Pentecost 2002.

As we journeyed together, that the proclamation of the message and the fulfilment of our purpose to advance the Kingdom of the Triune God on earth³ both flow out from our response to the call “to be with” God in Christ through the Holy Spirit became more visible.



Theological, Biblical and Ministerial Concepts

This was not merely an academic exercise. After eight years in parish ministry the feeling was growing that the theological grounding of my ministry obtained at New College and my ministry in practice were moving further and further apart. Undertaking the Doctor of Ministry program was instrumental in the process towards re-integration I was searching for. Of the nine papers that were a major part of the program four⁴ were directly related to the *Underpinning Theological, Biblical and Ministerial Concepts* section of the dissertation. Of the remaining five, two⁵ were used as source material for the discussion in the associated project in practice while three⁶ informed theology and practice in general and therefore were relevant to the wider ministerial context. What follows gives an insight into some of the content of the *Theological, Biblical and Ministerial Concepts* section of the dissertation.



1. Cultural/Social Change

In the eyes of many, including some who were once part of mainstream congregations, the Christian Church, like modern society, appears to have successfully emptied itself of any real ‘spiritual’ content. The

result is that ‘the many’ are looking elsewhere to experience ‘encounter with the ‘Holy Other’’. They are looking towards what is described as ‘postmodern’.⁷ Therefore, I reflected on two areas namely, some of the problematic characteristics of ‘modern’ and how I understand ‘post-modern’.

Problematic Characteristics of Modernity

For me, many questions being asked seriously by people from all sections of society today have existed since the advent of modern capitalism as a way of organising civil society.⁸ This was especially apparent in the work of the Romantics⁹ in particular William Blake and his dissatisfaction with the successive sub-divisions of the original, innocent human being into the individual elements that make up the unified being. Blake’s work depicts humanity as a slave to reason, un-illuminated by imagination. Around 1788 one of his figures appeared in *There is no Natural Religion* as an accompaniment to the text: “He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only, sees himself only.”¹⁰ Perhaps inevitably the Romantic era gave way to the Enlightenment and its promise of a utopia rooted in knowledge through reason and scientific discovery. As continued scientific discovery enabled the development of more and more rational processes, it was only a matter of time before we, humanity, knew all and controlled all.

Using George Ritzer’s book *The McDonaldisation of Society*, I was able to explore how the sterile combination of “efficiency, calculability, predictability and control” which evolved from these processes came to pervade the whole of society with many continuing to recognise the irrationality of the rational systems that are in fact *un-reasonable* systems because they actually *deny* the humanity of the people who work within them or are served by them. They are de-humanising. This, for George Ritzer, is the main irrationality of rationality.¹¹

As the twentieth century evolved and opportunities for a higher standard of education for all sections of society increased, more and more people have become dissatisfied with this progressively rationalised society

and the premise of a utopia rooted in the self-sufficiency of human knowledge and reason has become discredited. For many, that a greater ‘Other’ does exist in some form is now credible. That this greater ‘Other’ can be encountered through greater use of our imagination and our senses has become a possibility that can lead to a way of life with a greater sense of purpose. Thus, in the latter part of the twentieth century, in the sterile ‘picture’ we call ‘modernity’, what is now described as ‘postmodernity’ has evolved to a greater extent than ever before.

Postmodernity – What is it?

In his monograph Barry Smart confirms that the term “postmodernity” is used in three, distinct senses:

- (1) to imply difference, but through a relationship of continuity with (capitalist) modernity;
- (2) to indicate a break or rupture with modern conditions;
- (3) as a way of relating to modern forms of life, effectively a coming to terms with, a facing up to modernity, its benefits and its problematic consequences, its limits and limitations.¹²

Smart very quickly dispenses with (2). He does not agree that with the concept of “postmodern” we can identify the beginning of a new era. He sees it, as we have already suggested, as a response to “modernity” that has been in existence for some considerable time but “gathering momentum since the end of the nineteenth century”.¹³ Smart admits that the ideals of reason and freedom that epitomize “modernity” are in subtle peril but, rather than see “postmodernity” as a ‘new age’, he suggests it would be more accurate to describe it as:

recognition of this subtle peril, in effect to denote a way *of relating to* the limits and limitations of modernity, a way of living with the realization that the promise of modernity to deliver order, certainty and security will remain unfulfilled.¹⁴

Thus Barry Smart goes completely for option (3) noted above.

Changes brought about by technological development are many and varied. Huge ethical questions are arising as scientists discover more and more about how the created world ‘works’. Questions such as: the relationship of humanity with the rest of the created universe; the purpose of life; relationship of humanity with God as Creator and sustainer of life; relationships within the human race itself, are now all up for discussion.

For me definition (3) for “postmodern” brings a ray of hope to the Christian Church. We have an opportunity ‘to become’ a Church that promotes an alternative culture to the one offered by what is now an essentially non-Christian society. But ‘to be’ such a church we must change in a way that allows the creation of space where people can use their imagination and their senses to encounter ‘THE HOLY Other’, the Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Such space can be created in many ways and I believe one of these is to move towards recovering the ‘dynamics’ of New Testament communities contained in the description *koinonia* as a way of ‘being’ a community of loving relationships with a unique *kerygma* and *diakonia*. The associated practical dimension of this project was the first tentative step in that journey.



2. Reinvention or Renovation?

From my limited experience in Pittsburgh and an interactive reading of Donald Miller’s *Reinventing American Presbyterianism: Christianity for a New Millennium*,¹⁵ I was able to explore recent developments in the Church in the USA and concluded that they represent a reinvention of the ‘wheel’. As I regard worship as “the concrete centre of the life of the congregation”¹⁶ and as worship was central to the associated practical project, I considered some of the characteristics of worship that set new paradigm congregations apart from main stream denominations.¹⁷ I kept in mind two important questions:

- (a) What is fundamental to worship for it to be unmistakably Christian? and
- (b) How can worship retain theological integrity yet be culturally relevant?

The 'Wheel' of Worship Under Review

During the course on Reformed Worship an American colleague correctly commented: “Rejecting liturgy, new paradigm Churches have established an order of (1) praise, (2) preaching/teaching, (3) commitment, (4) ministry”. This suggested to me that new paradigm congregations have got worship, mission and opportunity for teaching totally confused. Jesus “appointed twelve, ... *to be* with him, *and* to be sent out to proclaim the message *and* to have authority to cast out demons.”¹⁸ There is a clear distinction here between worship and mission. Worship is the “to be with me” which should provide the essential spiritual food that gives us the strength “to be sent out to proclaim the message” and to act appropriately when we encounter situations of brokenness in our day-to-day lives.¹⁹ In this new paradigm model they appeared to be so concerned with the “to be sent out” that the “to be with” in which it should be rooted had become diminished almost to the point of extinction. Whatever happened to “Be still and know that I am God”?²⁰

This model of “doing”²¹ church was for me theologically narrow and, as a spiritual experience, shallow. ‘Worship’²² was addressed to a ‘Lord’, who, to be fair, was regarded as the ascended Jesus. But when the pastor then openly claimed that “the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection do not matter, only the ascended Jesus who intercedes as our Great High Priest matters” then I seriously began to question to what extent these congregations could in all honesty be described as worshipping the God revealed in the writings of the Old and New Testaments namely, the Triune God. We need the whole economy of Jesus if we are to understand the full significance of it being the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended *Christ* and no other being who is the ascended ‘great high priest’.²³

What also concerned me was the number of elements of Christian worship that were just not there or were there but lacking theological credibility. Most crucially, although bread and wine were distributed, the sacrament seemed to lack integrity. There was no connection made between the Word preached and the sharing of bread and wine. The latter came after the ‘praise’ and *before* the preaching that was actually teaching. So, in a congregation where symbols were regarded as having no utility value what did this signify? Also there was no opportunity for thanksgiving, petition, affirmation, lamentation or selfless intercession that are all very much part of the Psalms and of the Christian tradition. For me, this model of ‘doing’ church is reinventing the ‘wheel’ to the extent that it is beyond recognition as the ‘wheel’, that is a Christian community ‘being’ in communion with God through the act of worship. There is little doubt that the pastors of new paradigm churches have a vision of their church.²⁴ But the Christian Church is not their church. It is Christ’s church. As such it should never be influenced by the culture of the day to the extent that the length, breadth, depth and height of the love of the Triune God revealed in the whole corpus of Biblical writings is compromised: “A God small enough to grasp is not big enough to be adored.”²⁵

The God worshipped in new paradigm congregations is too small. The mysterious God of surprises who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, was just not there. What was there was all the “efficiency, calculability, predictability and control” that is abhorred by many in society today. It reflected humanity as a slave to reason, un-illuminated by imagination. This model of ‘worship’ reflected the colourless picture of modernity that many today are rejecting as they seek to encounter the ‘Other’ through imagination and the senses.

Creating ‘Space’ for Imagination and Use of the Senses

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God. All this is gathered up in

that emotion which most cleanses us from selfishness because it is the most selfless of emotions – adoration.²⁶

If our worship is to be visible as Christian then the God who becomes visible through the content of our worship must be the Triune God revealed in scripture:

... forgetting the Trinity has serious consequences for the life of the church in the world. By contrast, a fresh awareness of the doctrine and its implications can lead to renewal of worship and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a person, since ‘the fulfilment of human beings is to be found in relationships in community and not in self-assertive individualism’.²⁷

Most of us would agree that we first became aware of God as Trinity in our worship. Thus the elements of our worship taken together should ensure we have addressed and related equally and appropriately with all three persons of the Trinity. It is this relationship to the Tri-unity of God that distinguishes Christian worship from other kinds of worship.

I believe the divine mystery of the Christian Church can be visible as relevant to life today not by reinventing the ‘wheel’ that is worship but by renovating that ‘wheel’. That is, while retaining what is essential for worship to be recognisably Christian, renovate the elements of Christian worship, so that they can continue to do what is required of them in the twenty-first century.

The primary key to the meaning of the assembly is the correspondence between the essential structures of that assembly and the Biblical pattern whereby old words are made to speak the new.²⁸

I believe we can go some way to doing this by first, taking on board something of Gordon Lathrop’s juxtaposition of “Holy Things” with the “every day things” in our order of worship; second, re-awakening the *significance* of the symbols as *signs* that point to the God whom we worship namely, the Triune God; third, ensuring that our hymns, while retaining theological integrity, express what we believe in contemporary

language and imagery and are an integral part of the theme that should run through the whole act of worship.

The theologian must try to describe a vision that helps to explain what the Church is doing...

The daily experience of Christians is drawn into the theological vision. The differing stories of Christians are integrated into the story of Christ. Present and past are bound together in a corporate experience, and the theologian's task is to create a visionary account of it.²⁹

In the context of the Christian Church this vision must surely be the vision of the Triune God for the whole created order and its description, first and foremost, the objective of Christian worship. But I believe this is an objective that can only be achieved if we re-unite theology and the life of the Church.



3. Theology and the Life of the Church

Rowan Greer, when studying the works of the Fathers, was impressed by the constant dialogue between theology and the Church. He continues, "In general terms, this dialogue seems to me one that has been lost in the Church and very much needs to be restored. ... Theology and life have been divided from one another."³⁰ An example of the extent to which this is so is provided by the description of the new paradigm model in the previous section. Jürgen Moltmann is correct when he says:

The modern understanding of the Christian Faith as a practice of living which tries to conform to the life of Jesus, in order to carry on his cause, is only half the truth, because it only perceives one side of what the believer has to give.³¹

The ultimate consequence of this reductionism is that Jesus becomes no more than a good role model for 'human beings', with the mysterious Tri-unity of the God of surprises, who is in fact the principal actor in the Biblical Stories, completely rationalised out of the picture. To increase the utility value of Christianity in rational modern society, we have

sacrificed the mystery that makes our faith Christian. Yet, as ministers of Word and Sacrament our call is to enable those who participate in worship to encounter this mysterious Tri-unity of God as they worship. The quote from Rowan Greer at the end of the previous section says this is the theologian's task but for me, ministers of Word and Sacrament are theologians. If we see our theological training merely as a means to an end, then we are in danger of doing two things. First, although perhaps unwittingly, we will perpetuate the divide between theology and life to the point where, through time, the gap will become so large that the very 'being' of the Christian Church will be plunged into even greater crisis. Second, as a consequence of this, we are in danger of doing what I have said new paradigm congregations are doing namely, worshipping a God that is small enough to grasp and not God as God truly is, the mysterious Triune God of surprises whom we meet in scripture and whom we should *adore* in worship.

Donald Baillie claims that, apart from the paradox that is the incarnation, theologians have a habit of missing the paradox that is everywhere else in the Christian faith. He defines paradox as being a truly religious mystery that is close to experience and to faith and suggests that the reason "why the element of paradox comes into all religious thought and statement is because God cannot be comprehended in any human words or in any of the categories of our finite thought".³² When reflecting on the life and worship of the Christian Church, to ignore theology, in particular the mysterious paradox inherent in Christianity, is like drawing a map of the world on a flat piece of paper. It creates distortions and allows Church life to become like Donald Baillie's organism that fails to function as one body:

It has come to be divided into countless little bits of life, each person trying to be a quite individual cell, a self-sufficient atom, dancing on a pattern of its own, instead of joining in a great communal game of universal love. Each person makes himself the centre of his universe, caring little for the fellowship of the whole, but seeing things from a selfish point of view; becoming his own God and worshipping himself. . . . That is the temptation to which mankind has succumbed; we have put ourselves, each

one individually, in the centre of the universe, where God ought to be. And when persons do that, it separates them both from God and from each other.³³

I believe the root problem is the trend in the Western world towards rational, linear thought that leaves little room for the retention of mystery. This creates real problems when, as theologians, we have to hold together conceivably incompatible concepts as inseparable parts of the one mysterious concept. For example, we stress the transcendence of God or the immanence of God but have difficulty in conceiving them as existing both together. Despite a doctrine that acknowledges God as Tri-unity, in practice we have a doctrine of the Trinity that gives precedence to the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit in an apparently subordinate role as we regard the Son and the Holy Spirit as mediators of God the Father. This misses the point that through the events of the Gospel Story the *Triune* God revealed the breadth and depth and height and length of the already existing loving covenant of the Triune God with the created order. The creator God of Genesis 1 is not God the Father. From where we stand beyond the Easter event, God who at times is Creator or Redeemer or Giver and Sustainer of life is in all instances the Triune God of eternity acting in history, in 'time' as we know it. I believe modern linear thought and the practice of 'either/or' rather than 'both/and' has at best distorted and at worst made invisible the full dynamic of the internal communion of loving relationship of the Triune God and how humanity participates in that internal loving relationship.

The 'life' of any Christian community reflects how the community "understands God as present and working in everything".³⁴ What we require therefore, is a doctrine of the Trinity freed from the restraints of our overly rational, linear, thought process. We require an exploration of the possibility of a doctrine of the Trinity that allows us to rediscover the full dynamic of the internal loving relationship of the Triune God together with the dynamics of how we participate in this communion of loving relationship. When converted into ecclesiastical practice, this should enable the relationship of theology and the life of the Church to become significantly more apparent.



By Way of Conclusion

From the participants' evaluation of the project, I was satisfied that this first steps project did appear to fulfil its objective. Personally, I got a tremendous amount out of undertaking the whole program and feel my ministry, and that of the congregations, was much enriched. I now find myself in a position to take up some of the further study suggestions I made and so develop my understanding of the 'dynamics' of 'being' a covenant people in communion of loving relationship with the One God of Tri-unity in the 21st century.

- ¹ Mark 3: 14-15 NRSV (Italics mine)
- ² Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) and Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*, (Louisville: Kentucky, 1989) were useful resources.
- ³ My interpretation of "to have authority to cast out demons".
- ⁴ These were: Postmodernity and The Bible as Story "It is a mystery!" Come! Meet it face to face in Worship (This also described some changes of approach in worship practice made during the associated practical project.) Congregations as Koinonia 1: In Communion of Loving Relationship with the Triune God Congregations as Koinonia 2: Towards recovering The Relationship of Theology and Life.
- ⁵ Used in Lent Reflections: Reformed Tradition in the Church in the 21st Century: Part 1: The Church – Confessing Community thus Moral Community; Part 2: A Doctrine of Ministry – Theory that is also Practice! Related to a series of sermons on Mark's Gospel: What does Jesus mean for us today? How does Modern Scholarship help answer that question?
- ⁶ These were: The Church as Transformationist in an Age of Science and Technology (future mission) The Ecumenical Movement from Past to Future (relates to our role in the universal Church) A Personal Reflection on Euthanasia: A Right to Choose? (one of the many ethical issues that the Church faces today).

- ⁷ John Drane *The McDonaldisation of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2000).
- ⁸ Max Weber *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ⁹ For the debate see Alasdair Clayre, ed., *Nature and Industrialisation* (Oxford University Press, 1977).
- ¹⁰ Martin Butler, *William Blake*, (London: Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1983) p. 7.
- ¹¹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society* (California: Pine Forge Press, 1996) chapter 7.
- ¹² Barry Smart, *Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 23.
- ¹³ Smart, *Postmodernity*, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ Smart, *Postmodernity*, p. 27.
- ¹⁵ London: University of California Press, 1997.
- ¹⁶ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and The Service of God*, (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1934), p. 190.
- ¹⁷ This was significant for the purpose of this project because this new paradigm ‘way of doing Church’ in the USA has crossed the Atlantic and is seen by an increasing number in the Church of Scotland as the answer to our problems.
- ¹⁸ See also p.1 of this article.
- ¹⁹ Interpretation of “authority to cast out demons”.
- ²⁰ Psalm 46:10.
- ²¹ ‘doing Church’ is their terminology. I prefer ‘being’. The subtle distinction was crucial to this project.
- ²² This does not refer to the whole ‘program’. “The term worship means singing and twenty to twenty-five minutes are always directed to (*standing*) to *praise* God and express love for him” Miller, *Reinventing*, p. 13.
- ²³ Hebrews 4: 14-16.
- ²⁴ Miller, *Re-inventing*, p. 14.
- ²⁵ Comment by an elder in the congregation where I was Associate Minister. Source unknown.
- ²⁶ As quoted in William Sykes, *Visions of Grace: An Anthology of Reflections* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1997) p. 16.

- ²⁷ Back cover of booklet 2 of *The Forgotten Trinity*, (British Council of Churches, 1989) .
- ²⁸ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) p. 80.
- ²⁹ Rowan Greer, *Broken Lights and Mended Lives* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986) p. 7.
- ³⁰ Greer, *Broken Lights*, p. 1
- ³¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM Press, 1980) p. 7.
- ³² D.M. Baillie, *God was in Christ*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948) p. 108.
- ³³ Baillie, p. 204
- ³⁴ Nessian, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission*, p. 2