Be the Community: Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Missional Church

ABSTRACT

In the face of the apparent decline of the church in the West, advocates for the 'Missional' church and the 'Emerging' church have called for reform. This essay critiques these influential movements for their historically and sociologically naive analysis of the church's decline and their lack of sustained theological reflection. Drawing on the work of Paul Fiddes, the essay explores what an appropriate Baptist missional ecclesiology might be, arguing that what defines the church's role in mission is not primarily what it does or needs to do functionally to be relevant in mission but who it ontologically is in Christ.

Introduction

The church in Western society is in serious decline on many fronts. There has been significant decline in the church's attendance, influence and role within society throughout the last generation. Some express this as the process of both external *and* internal secularisation and note that it has decisively altered the Western church in either its social locale or its inner universe of meaning, or both.[1] Whilst there is some debate regarding the legitimacy of the secularisation theory,[2] the significant marginalisation of the church and its role within society is undoubted. Some estimate the church will continue to decline in some areas in the West until there is only a residual Christian presence.[3] In response to this

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[1] T. Luckman, 'The Decline of Church-Oriented Religion' in *Sociology of Religion,* ed. Roland Robertson (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969):149-150.

[2] See Peter Matheson, 'The Myth of a Secular New Zealand,' *Pacifica* 19, no. 2 (2006). 177-92.

[3] Derek Tidball, 'Leadership and Baptist Church Governance: Biblical Foundations,' in *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, ed. Graeme Chatfield (NSW: Morling Press, 2005). 9.

dramatic decline, many now argue that if the church in the West is to survive, it must radically reconceive itself to become relevant and missionally effective in the current cultural context.

As a Baptist Minister I am interested in how the church might respond in its current cultural context from the theological perspective of the Baptist vision of church. What may be an appropriate Baptist ecclesiological response? Two recent movements have been at the forefront of the cry for the reform of the church – the Missional Church and the Emerging Church.[4] For this essay I will focus primarily on the New Zealand, Australian and British authors of the Missional and Emerging Church to acknowledge that these forms are often different than those from America. Both of these movements have contributed creative and thoughtful responses. Whilst this essay is a sympathetic critique of these two movements, I remain deeply indebted to the many thoughtful theological, missiological and ecclesiological insights of the Missional Church and the Emerging Church. Both have influenced my thinking and my practice. Nonetheless, this essay critiques these responses for what Michael Jinkins describes as 'two gaping holes in the analysis' of the church and its decline.[5] The first is the lack of careful historical and sociological examination of the church's decline, to place it in its proper context. The second is the lack of sustained theological reflection. Whilst agreeing with much of their analysis of the church's decline and the cultural change, I will argue that the Missional Church and the Emerging Church view culture as both cause *and cure* for the church's decline. I will argue that as a result they define the church in primarily functional terms – the church is defined by what it does (or needs to do) to be relevant in mission. I will argue instead that whilst mission activity is very important, if the church is to fulfil its role in God's mission it needs a theological understanding of the nature and scope of the church within God's mission.

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[4] Darrell Guder states that the rise of the Missional Church is due to the changing cultural context in the West generally and North America specifically. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998). 3-7. John Drane states that the rise of the Emerging Church is due to serious church decline. John Drane, 'Editorial: The Emerging Church,' *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006). 3.

[5] Michael Jinkins, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God's Church* (accessed 10 July 2007); available from http://www.synodrm.org/Resoures/Stewardship/Stewards%20of%20the%20Mystery%God.doc. 17.

In the second section I will draw upon the work of Paul Fiddes, a British Baptist theologian, to outline the contours of the historic Baptist vision of church and, most importantly for this essay, highlight its underlying theological convictions. Having established this *theological* Baptist vision of church, I will then use it to explore what an appropriate missional ecclesiology might be. This methodology stands in contrast to that of the Missional and Emerging Church which use a primarily sociological grid to define a relevant missional ecclesiology. I will argue that what defines the church's role in mission is not primarily what it does or needs to do functionally to be relevant in mission but who it ontologically is in Christ. I will conclude this essay by showing how this primarily theological understanding of the nature of the church and its participation in God's mission provides different implications for a Baptist missional ecclesiology than those of the Missional and Emerging Church.

Church Decline

The church in the West has fallen on hard times. It is facing decline on multiple fronts all at once – decline in terms of numbers attending, of membership, of finances, of the number of people willing to serve in positions of leadership (both lay and ordained), of its influence within society, of people identifying themselves as Christian and a decline in comprehension of the Biblical narrative both outside *and inside* the church.[6]

Within the New Zealand context, Kevin Ward has conducted extensive research and concludes 'Whatever statistics one uses, and however one looks at them, they all point in one direction: down.' [7] Church attendance in New Zealand in 1960 was about 20% of the

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[6] Chris Marshall, commenting on the lack of Biblical literacy in New Zealand comments: 'What then is this 'crisis' of biblical proportions (!) to which people refer? Put simply, it is the way in which the Christian community is becoming increasingly estranged from its sacred text, the Bible, increasingly deaf to its witness, bewildered by its contents, unsure of how best to read it or apply it responsibly to life, and unable to explain just why it is the Bible ought to be esteemed so highly.' Chris Marshall, 'Re-Engaging with the Bible in a Postmodern World,' *Stimulus* 15, no. 1 (2007). 5.

[7] Kevin Ward, "No Longer Believing' - or - 'Believing without Belonging',' in *The Future of Christianity: Historical, Sociological, Political and Theological Perspectives from New Zealand*, ed. John Stenhouse and Brett Knowles (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004). 60.

population weekly and about 40% monthly. By 1999 this had halved to 10% weekly and 20% monthly. Not only is the church declining, it is not replacing itself in the next generation. In 1960, 169,000 children were on Protestant Sunday school rolls (40% of the primary school roll). By 1985 the Protestant Sunday School roll was at 52,800 (11.4% of the Primary School roll).[8] In terms of age profile, the church is, on average, much older than the rest of society whilst having low levels of young attendees. The report of the findings of the New Zealand Church Life Survey states '[the] church has greater proportions of people aged over 50 years and only half the number under 40 years than the community.'[9] Such troubling statistics for the church in New Zealand has been cause for significant alarm and is a clear indicator that all is not well. The New Zealand story is not unique. John Drane points to research which suggests that by 2040 there will be only a residual Christian presence in Britain, and that the institutional structures will have imploded and disappeared long before that.[10] According to Alan Hirsch the church today is further away from world evangelisation than we were at the end of the third century.[11] Mike Riddell bluntly writes '53,000 attenders are leaving the church in Europe and North America every week, and they are not coming back.'[12] As Michael Jinkins wryly comments 'the only thing that appears to be growing in mainline Protestantism is the literature on its decline.'[13]

The decline of the church in the West is seen by Missional Church and Emerging Church authors as a clear indicator of how ineffective and irrelevant the church is today and its dire need to radically reconceive itself for mission in today's world or face the reality of becoming an ancient relic of a nostalgic past.

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[8] Kevin Ward, 'Losing My Religion? An Examination of Church Decline, Growth and Change in New Zealand 1960 to 1999, with Particular Reference to Christchurch' (University of Otago, 2003). 8-9. See also Ward, 'No Longer Believing' - or - 'Believing without Belonging'.': 60 and Kevin Ward, 'Is New Zealand's Future Churchless?,' *Stimulus* 12, no. 2 (2004). 2.

[9] Cited in Ward, 'Losing My Religion? An Examination of Church Decline, Growth and Change in New Zealand 1960 to 1999, with Particular Reference to Christchurch'. 9-10. See also David Allis, 'Has the Church Had Its Day?,' *The New Zealand Baptist* 123, no. 2 (2007). 3.

[10] Drane. 'The Emerging Church' 3.

[11] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006). 51.

[12] Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West* (London: SPCK, 1998). 3.

[13] Jinkins, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God's Church.* 3.

Paradigm Shift:

It is widely agreed that Western culture has undergone major cultural change in the last 50 years. The Missional Church and the Emerging Church perceive this to be an unprecedented paradigm shift. The paradigm shift theory is based on the work of Thomas Kuhn and his analysis of how the natural sciences grow and change.[14] Paradigm shifts occur when scientific theories are assailed by internal contradictions, exposed by new evidence, and are therefore abandoned in favour of a new theory and paradigm.[15] Authors of the Missional Church and the Emerging Church argue that Western culture and the Western church is undergoing another major paradigm shift (the Missional Church – from Christendom to Post-Christendom; the Emerging Church – from Modernism to Postmodernism). In light of this paradigm shift, they argue that the church must radically reconceive itself for the new paradigm. The inappropriateness of applying Kuhn's paradigm shift model to define culture and historical church eras will be a significant critique later in this essay.

Missional Church – From Christendom to Post-Christendom

In their analysis of the current cultural climate, the Missional Church authors argue that Western culture has shifted from a Christendom era to a Post-Christendom era. In the Christendom shift, a major change occurred for Christianity in the fourth century when it moved from being *religio illicita* to becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire.[16] This Christendom shift is characterised in the way Christianity moved from society's margins to take a central place within the State and

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[14] Thomas S. Khun, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 3rd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

[15] Martin Sutherland, 'Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West ' in *Mission without Christendom: Exploring the Site. Essays for Brian Smith*, ed. Martin Sutherland (Auckland: Carey Baptist College, 2000). 132-33. David Bosch applied Kuhn's theory to divide the history of the church's mission to the world into six distinct paradigms. David. J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991). 181-82.

[16] The conversion of Constantine and Theodosius' instatement of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire are marked by many Missional Church authors as vital starting points in the Christendom paradigm shift.

Christians came to occupy central positions in society. Christians were no longer regarded as deviant. Christianity had become the religion of the imperial establishment and a vital part of the constellation of powers within the new Christian State. Some see the relationship between church and state in Christendom to have bred an oppressive form of culturally accommodated Christianity that was missionally impotent. Darrell Guder argues that one of the major lasting legacies of Christendom is the reductionism of the gospel, salvation and the mission of the church.[17] Wilbert Shenk goes as far as to say that the Christendom church was a church without a mission.[18] Mike Riddell characterises the Christendom church with centuries of manipulation, power, religious hegemony and abuse.[19]

This Christendom view of the church's role in society and mission is argued to have lasted up until recent years. With the paradigm shift in culture, the church, with its Christendom mentality, is today rendered missionally impotent.[20] The Christendom Church is seen in contrast to the Missional Church as formal not informal; institutional not fluid; organisational not relational; structured not flexible; static not dynamic; attractional not incarnational; hierarchical not functional; and buildings-focussed not people-focussed.[21] The problem is, it is argued, that in recent times the Christendom paradigm has begun to break up and the church has fallen from its position of prominence. The church has been pushed from the centre of Western society to the margins and must

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[17] Darrell L. Guder, 'The Church as Missional Community,' in *The Community of the Word: Toward and Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel Trier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005). 117-21.

[18] Wilbert R. Shenk, 'New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (2005). 73. See also Guder, 'The Church as Missional Community.' 117-120.

[19] Michael Riddell, 'Beyond Ground Zero: Resourcing Faith in a Post-Christian Era Obligation,' in *The Future of Christianity: Historical, Sociological, Political and Theological Perspectives from New Zealand*, ed. Brett Knowles and John Stenhouse (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004). 219.

[20] Michael Frost argues that the Christendom paradigm has lasted up until the twentieth century and that for seventeen centuries little has changed in the understandings of how we 'do' church. Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006). 4-8.

[21] See Ibid. See also Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003). 14-21.

rethink how it can be missionally effective in a Post-Christendom society.

David Bjork, drawing on the work of French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, speaks of a deliberate process of *ex*culturation of Christianity in the context of Western Europe. *Ex*culturation is not just that the church is losing its influence in French society; but that even the Christian tissue underlying the secular European culture is coming undone.[22] Upon his return from more than 30 years of missionary service in India, Lesslie Newbigin, a key author for Missional Church writers, found that the Christian soul of the Western world he left had all but disappeared and the West was now a mission field. Newbigin asked, 'Can the West be converted?'[23] Missional Church authors argue this can happen only if the church reforms its Christendom mentality and regains a missional identity and stance in a Post-Christendom society.

Recapturing the 'Sentness' of the Church:

According to Patrick Mays the cure for the church is simple: rid the church of 'Christendom cholesterol' and excessive institutional fat.[24] Others argue for a less simplistic response and, importantly, call for the church to recapture its fundamental 'sentness' within God's redemptive plan.[25] Missional Church authors employ the theological concept of the *missio Dei* as crucial in highlighting the missional nature of the church as

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[22] David E. Bjork, 'The Future of Christianity in Western Europe: The End of a World,' *Missiology* 34, no. 3 (2006). 309-310. I have highlighted, elsewhere, similar significant cultural changes that occurred in New Zealand in the 1960s, and the impact this had upon the church and its role in New Zealand society. See Andrew Picard, 'A Conflict of Ideologies: New Zealand Baptist Discourse on the Vietnam War,' *The Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 1, no. 1 (2005).

[23] Lesslie Newbigin, 'Can the West Be Converted?,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 (1987). See also Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986). See also Craig Van Gelder, 'A Great New Fact of Today: America as Mission Field ' in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996).

[24] Patrick Mays, 'After Christendom What? Renewal and Discovery of Church and Mission in the West,' *Missiology* 27, no. 2 (1999). 256.

[25] Craig Van Gelder, 'From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today,' *Review and Expositor* 101, no. Summer (2004). 427-28.

one who is being sent into the world. Bosch draws on John 20:21 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you', writing that mission comes from the very nature of God as Trinity. 'The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.'[26] The church is not to understand itself as a place where certain things happen but as the called and sent people of God. Therefore, Missional Church authors rightly argue, the normal posture of a faithful church to any culture is that of a missionary encounter as opposed to the culturally accommodated church of Christendom.[27]

A defining feature of the Missional Church is how it views the church's relationship to the kingdom/reign of God. Guder argues that the church must understand itself as an eschatological community of salvation which has its beginning and foundation in the reign of God. The church is not to be equated with the kingdom of God, but is a sign and firstfruit of the kingdom that has come in Christ. Guder helpfully argues that the church is called and empowered by God to be the sign, foretaste and instrument of God's new order under the lordship of Christ.[28] This identity of the chruch is then placed within the wider framework of the theological concept of the *missio Dei.* I will later argue that the concept of *missio Dei* that is developed here places the *missio Dei* out of the hands of God and into the hands of the church. The church is now sent out by the risen Jesus to carry out the *missio Dei* by making known to all the world the joyful message of Jesus as risen and returning Lord and incarnating it in their particular contexts. Importantly, Missional Church authors maintain that the fundamental purpose of the church is mission and the church's nature serves this more fundamental purpose.[29] Frost and Hirsch see the church needing to reinvent itself as

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[26] Bosch. *Transforming Mission.* 390.

[27] George R. Hunsberger, 'Evangelical Conversion toward a Missional Ecclesiology,' in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). 109. See also Michael W. Goheen, 'Liberating the Gospel from Its Modern Cage: An Interpretation of Lesslie Newbigin's Gospel and Modern Culture Project,' *Missionalia* 30, no. 3 (2002). 361; and David E. Bjork, 'Toward a Trinitarian Understanding of Mission in Post-Christendom Lands,' *Missiology* 27, no. 2 (1999). 232.

[28] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church.* 35-48. See also Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.* 86.

[29]Shenk. 'New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology' 79.

incarnational communities, as opposed to the attractionally focussed church of Christendom with its 'come to us' mentality. Such reinvented churches will be planted communities of Christians who are engaging with society *outside* the church context and on the terms of the people who are *outside* the church. Examples of such incarnational missional communities are Christian shoe stores, Christian cafés and restaurants that are frequented by both Christians and not-yet-Christians, where mutual interaction and organic, natural relationships may form and people will be drawn closer to God. Examples of such incarnational missional communities are Christian shoe stores, Christian cafés and restaurants that are frequented by both Christians and not-yet-Christians, where mutual interaction and organic, natural relationships may form and people will be drawn closer to God.[30]

These Missional Church authors view the nature of the church as primarily functional, defined by whatever is useful in the church's external evangelistic mission to the world. I will argue that such functional views of the church and its mission neglect the church's ontological identity and unhelpfully move the *missio Dei* from being something that God is primarily responsible for to being something that the church is primarily responsible for. Such a movement has significant theological implications.

Emerging Church – from Modernism to Postmodernism

The Emerging Church emphasises the cultural paradigm shift more in terms of a shift from Modernism to Postmodernism than Christendom to Post-Christendom.[31] Modernism is linked to the spirit of the Enlightenment where the general mood is one of optimism and progress. The main underlying assumption that is present in all

[30] Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. 41-46.

[31] Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland: Group Publishing, Inc, 1999). 22-24. See also John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon: Smith and Helwys Publishing, Inc, 2001). 68; Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come.* 15; Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000). 28-30; Brian D. McLaren, *The Church in the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). 11-13; Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future.* 101; Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002). 47.

'Enlightenment' thinking is epistemological foundationalism. In Modernity, autonomous human reason became the foundation that lay behind the Western epistemological quest and thus was the governing principle for establishing truth statements.[32] Rene Descartes' famous phrase *cogito ergo sum,* 'I think therefore I am' sums up this quest for an autonomous rational foundation.

Emerging Church authors maintain that the framework of Modernity has undergone significant changes and is now breaking up to give way to postmodernity. James Smith writes of a disorientation from one construction of reality and a reorientation to a new construction of reality; from modernity to postmodernity.[33] Within today's Western culture, there has been a movement away from the universalising metanarratives of Modernity and a shift towards much more localised and tribal truths. In Modernity truth claims were seen as timeless, universal propositions that were deduced by logic. In postmodernity, truth claims are now seen as situational and perspectival. Jacques Derrida, the famous French Deconstructionist author, suggests that metaphysics, with its inherent logocentrism, is now exposed as a social construction and mere talk about talk. Derrida argues that sciences that claim to tell us anything about how the world objectively is are actually driven by power, control and oppression (predominantly by the white male; a 'white mythology'). Derrida claims that rather than being able to point upwards to metaphysics, we can only point across to language. Therefore, 'there is nothing outside the text.'[34] Derrida's deconstructionism aside, it is clear that at a very fundamental level there has been a profound shift in the current cultural context in how people view themselves, the world and their search for meaning.

The diagnosis of the Emerging Church is that the Western church is irretrievably wedded to Modernity and Enlightenment assumptions

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[32] Stanley J. Grenz, 'Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism,' in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000). 110.

[33] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2006). 17.

[34] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). 158. For a response to Derrida and deconstructionism see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998): 63.

and therefore is irrelevant to the new postmodern era.[35] The Modern Church is seen as building-based, word-based, needs-defining, centralised, inflexible, authoritarian and boundary-obsessed. 'It is 'heavy' church in multiple senses of the word, requiring intense resource expenditure to maintain and extracting costly allegiance from its participants.'[36] Drane, drawing on the work of George Ritzer, speaks of the McDonaldisation of the church. The Modern church is characterised by the ideals of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. The Modern church, with its quick-fix, pre-packaged and marketed rituals, more closely resembles a fast-food outlet that emulates middle class values of predictability, efficiency and control than the dynamic community of God. Drane also notes the dehumanising effects of the Modern church that treats people as numbers on the bottom line of yet another church growth strategy. [37] Drane warns that the Church is 'increasingly in danger of being left high and dry as one of the last bastions of modernity.'[38] The implication is that if the world has changed then the church must change in order to remain relevant.

Postmodern Contextualisation:

Emerging Church authors emphasise the need for the church to recontextualise itself for today's postmodern world. Scott Bader-Saye defines the postmodern ethos as a return to mystery; a hunger for spirituality; new models of networked communities; a desire to find roots in tradition; and a yearning to encounter God through image, ritual and sacrament.[39] Whatever form the Emerging Church takes it is agreed that there will be a movement away from rational logocentrism and a

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[35] Riddell, 'Beyond Ground Zero' 219. See also Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church? Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). 22-30.

[36] Riddell, 'Beyond Ground Zero' 223. See also Pete Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision of How to Be God's People in Worship and Mission – a Flexible, Fluid Way of Being Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002). 13-30.

[37] Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church.* 51-54 and Riddell, *Threshold of the Future.* 65-86.

[38] Drane, *The McDonaldlization of the Church.* 54.

[39] Scott Bader-Saye, 'Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation,' *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006).16.

movement towards creativity, spontaneity and a much greater focus on 'the arts'.[40]

Central to the church's response to postmodernity will be the need to embrace people's desire for community. Modernity, with its incipient individualism, is seen as leaving people feeling isolated and alone. It is argued that in Postmodernism there is a renewed desire for community. Such community will seek to hold in tension the need to share a deep unity without falling into the stifling homogeneity and bland one-size-fits-all straight-jacket of the Modern Church. Steve Taylor draws on the writings of popular culture author Douglas Coupland and asserts that in postmodernity meaning and truth are found through community and the shared stories of life together. Spiritual seekers are seeking community and belonging before they come to believe, therefore the church must be a place that values communal meaning and truth seeking.[41] Such a view of community will hold in tension the one and the many, based on Trinitarian theology and the *perichoretic* relations that exist within the life of Father, Son and Spirit.[42] Later in this essay I will contrast this vision of postmodern community that seeks community and then constructs tribal truths with the historic Baptist vision of the covenanted community that sought truth and found community.

Emerging Church authors also emphasise the growth in desire for spirituality in postmodernity which coincides with a decline in church attendance. This decline in belonging has affected not just the church but all kinds of voluntary institutions and organisations.[43] It is interpreted that whilst people desire God, they are not seeking God in the Institutional Church. The message seems to be 'yes' to God but 'no' to church. This phenomenon is called 'believing without belonging'.[44]

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[40] Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*; Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*. 190. See especially the examples cited by Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision of How to Be God's People in Worship and Mission – a Flexible, Fluid Way of Being Church* 94-97.

[41] Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church*. 101-103.

[42] Ibid. 108-110.

[43] Ward, 'Is New Zealand's Future Churchless?.' 3. See also Tidball. 'Biblical Foundations' 9-10.

[44] Ward, 'Is New Zealand's Future Churchless?.' See also Ward, ''No Longer Believing' - or - 'Believing without Belonging'.'; Ward, 'Losing My Religion? An Examination of Church Decline, Growth and Change in New Zealand 1960 to 1999, with Particular Reference to Christchurch'. The most significant work that has been developed on the phenomenon of believing without belonging in the New Zealand context is the important work of Alan Jamieson. See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond*

Studies of church leavers within Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches show that many people, some of whom were key leaders within the church, left the church not because they had lost their faith but in order to grow in their faith.[45] The Modern Church, with its nice, bland, middle class spirituality, is seen as not resourcing Christians or spiritual seekers on their spiritual quest in a postmodern world. Drane argues that we have ended up with a secular church in a spiritual society.[46] Many Emerging Church authors conclude that '[if] people want God, then the problem doesn't lie with those outside the church; it rests on those inside.'[47] The problem is seen to be at the supply end and not the demand end – apparently the customer *is* always right. I will later critique this view as reducing the church to little more than a marketing agent.

Zygmunt Bauman, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Leeds University, is regarded as a significant voice when it comes to describing the current cultural context. He gives it the term 'Liquid Modernity' and many Emerging Church authors draw on his sociological insights. Bauman contrasts Liquid Modernity with Solid Modernity and argues that the structures, referents and certainties of Solid Modernity have been liquified in the rapidly changing context of Liquid Modernity.[48] Pete Ward, whose book *Liquid Church* is seen as an important work for many within the Emerging Church, bases his ecclesiology on Bauman's insights. Ward argues that life in postmodernity is a series of consumptive choices and shopping is not about purchasing useful goods but about desire and the meaning the goods give us in terms of constructing identity and status. In response, it is argued that the church in postmodernity must embrace consumption and design church to feed the desires of spiritual consumers. 'Thus [the church] community would

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Evangelical, Pentecostal & Charismatic Churches (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).7-14. See also Alan Jamieson, 'Post-Church Groups and Their Place as Emergent Forms of Church,' *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006).

[45] Jamieson, *Churchless Faith*.7-22.

[46] Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*. 54.

[47] Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision of How to Be God's People in Worship and Mission – a Flexible, Fluid Way of Being Church* 75. See also John Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith: The Future of the Church. Biblical and Missiological Essays* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000).

[48] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

evolve around what people find interesting, attractive, and compelling.'[49] Ward argues for a radical decentering and reworking of congregational gathering and worship into relational networks in order to connect with the growing spiritual hunger in society. Church would be more like a network than an assembly of people. Such a networked church would become a series of relational networks and communications that connect individuals, groups, and organisations in a series of flows. People would gather around hubs that they find interesting such as a retreat centre, a sports team, a music group, a record company, or a Christian shop. These informal fellowships, where people experience Christ as they share with other Christians, are to be understood *as church* and takes the place of going to church and being committed to belonging.[50] Ward suggests that the basis of these networks of relations is found in the *perichoretic* life of God as Trinity.[51] I will later critique this view of consumptive church as not only misreading the work of Zygmunt Baumant but also misreading the nature of the Trinity.

What these Emerging Church authors share in common is the belief that church forms, even gathering together for worship, must be radically reconceived in order for the church to be relevant in a postmodern age. In this way, these authors see Postmodernism as not only the cause for the church's decline but *also its cure* – the church must become postmodern. Like their Missional Church counterparts, the Emerging Church authors see the nature of the church as primarily functional and defined by their postmodern contextualisation.

'Two gaping holes'

Historical Reductionism:

Missional Church and Emerging Church authors rightly argue that Western culture has undergone significant cultural shifts. However, the apocalyptic and bombastic rhetoric of 'never seen before tectonic paradigms shifts' is naïve and historically inaccurate.[52] Such an analysis is

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[49] Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision of How to Be God's People in Worship and Mission – a Flexible, Fluid Way of Being Church* . 89.
[50] Ibid.2.
[51] Ibid. 53-55.
[52] D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005): 75-78.

appealing as it creates a crisis and the need for a radical church revolution.[53] As Martin Sutherland suggests, such an analysis is exciting but the definitions resemble more of a crude cartoon picture than any actual historical reality.[54] Scott Bayder-Saye acknowledges that the Emerging Church is plagued by hype and overstatement in its rhetoric.[55] The question of just how far separated from modernity postmodernity actually is, will be an important later discussion. Is postmodernity the most useful term or does 'mostmodernity' better capture the current context?

Importantly, Sutherland argues that the adoption of Kuhn's model of scientific paradigm shift and its application to analysing Western culture is inappropriate and gives a misleading comprehension of Western culture. Cultures are far too complex and variegated to be described by simplistic labels such as 'Postmodern', 'Post-Christendom' or 'Generation X'.[56] In terms of historical accuracy the Christendom period, in which secular and spiritual power were fused together and the Pope was the paramount figure, lasted for only three hundred years in the Medieval Period.[57] The historical reductionism of the Missional Church and Emerging Church authors simplifies taxonomies such as Christendom or Enlightenment to become mere terms of abuse. Brian Stanley notes the irony of how so much postmodern writing falls prey to the very universalising and essentialising tendencies of Enlightenment epistemology that it so deplores.[58] A sense of history teaches caution

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[53] See Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. ix. See also McLaren's idea of a dramatic, historic, unrepeatable kind of (cultural) movement. *Church on the Other Side*. 11; Sweet's ideas of the 'Postmodern Era' *Aqua Church*. 24; Riddell's idea of a new cultural matrix, *Threshold of the Future*. 101; and Drane's idea that everyone in the next generation will be 'postmodern', *McDonaldization of the Church*. 68. Bader-Saye, 'Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation' 15.

[54] Sutherland, 'Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West '. 132.

[55] Bader-Saye, 'Improvising Church: An Introduction to the Emerging Church Conversation' 15.

[56] Sutherland, 'Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West': 135-36.

[57] Ibid. 136-37.. See also John Colwell, 'In Defence of Christendom: The Claim of Christ and the Defence of the Church,' *Baptist Minister's Journal* (2007).

[58] Brian Stanley, 'Christian Missions and the Enlightenment: A Reevaluation,' in *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*, ed. Brian Stanley

about exaggerated accounts of the 'unprecedented challenges' facing the contemporary Western church and this sense of history gives it some perspective.[59] As Sutherland suggests, far from being anything new and paradigmatic, Postmodernism has many historical parallels in the thinking of Blake, Coleridge, Rousseau, Hazlitt, Emerson and Thoreau. Rather than a new paradigm, it is more likely that different threads of thinking exist together throughout time but come to public prominence at different times.[60] Michael Jinkins argues that the collapsing of sixteen centuries of the church's development into a so-called Christendom paradigm is simplistic and fails to do justice to the splendid panopoly of Christian history. Most significantly, the simplistic paradigm shift model resigns sixteen hundred years of the church's history to failure when reflection on the creative multiplicity of the church's historical response to culture could be the very thing that could help it in this time of change. Critiquing the simplistic taxonomies used by Loren Mead, Jinkins writes,

> In a sense, the simplicity of his categories of taxonomy and his elusion of contradiction, countervailation, paradox, and irony lead him to miss or to ignore the one thing that seems most obvious about the church throughout its history: there are a multiplicity of forms of ministry that are coming into existence; there are emerging a variety of models or paradigms for church; and this situation is not unique, or unprecedented, but is the way the church is and has always been.'[61]

As I have argued, the Emerging Church views Postmodernism as not only the cause of the church's decline but also its cure. However,

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(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). 5. See also Jeffery K. Jue's critique of the Emerging Church's pseudo historical scholarship in defining the Enlightenment period. Jeffery K. Jue, 'What's Emerging in the Church? Postmodernity, the Emergent Church, and the Reformation,' *Themelios* 31, no. 2 (2006). 22-27.

[59] Robert Hannaford, 'Editorial: Mission and Ministry,' *Ecclesiology* 3, no. 1 (2006). 8.

[60] Sutherland, 'Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West '. 142. See also Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity. The 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).11-40; Ted Peters, *God - the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). 19; and Tyron Inbody, 'Postmodernism: Intellectual Velcro Dragged across Culture?,' *Theology Today* 51 (1995). 536-38.

[61] Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). 60.

basing any ecclesiology on being relevant to the shifting sands of culture is fraught with danger. Postmodernism is a very slippery term and there is significant debate about its definition and nature. According to Ellen Charry, Derrida's philosophy does not represent a departure from autonomous rationalism, but rather stands in continuity. The commonality, argues Charry, lies in the emphasis on emancipation from any external referent. 'Emancipation, first from external constraint and now from meaning itself, binds this long tradition into a single narrative from Descartes to Derrida.'[62] Gunton and many others suggest that Postmodernism is better termed late Modernism, or as McClendon sardonically terms it – 'Mostmodernism', for its connection to, rather than its separation from Modernism.[63] Inbody sees Postmodernism as an 'enlightenment of the Enlightenment'.[64] There is also debate about the intellectual credibility of some postmodern philosophy. Andrew Moore picks up on the paradox that is present in Derrida's deconstructionist writings and postmodern epistemology – 'meaninglessness expressed meaningfully.'[65] Alister McGrath critiques the postmodern attack on the natural sciences as little more than 'pseudo-scientific jibberish'.[66] He finally, and importantly, notes that Postmodernism has been seen as attractive 'not on account of its intellectual *credentials*, but on account of its intellectual *consequences*.'[67] This at least highlights the need for caution in any suggestion that the church must reconceive itself to be relevant to postmodernity. In viewing postmodernity as both cause and cure for the church's ills, the Emerging Church's message seems clear – the church must become postmodern. This has the effect of turning the Christian hope into the desire that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Postmodernism is Lord to the glory of Continental Deconstructionism.

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[62] Ellen T Charry, 'The Crisis of Modernity and the Christian Self,' in *A Passion for God's Reign*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). 98.

[63] James Wm. McClendon, *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000). 219-26. See also Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*. 12; 69-70.

[64] Inbody, 'Postmodernism: Intellectual Velcro Dragged Across Carpet' 537-38.

[65] Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). 151. For a more sustained argument against deconstruction, see Vanhoozer.

[66] Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Reality*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). 188.

[67] Ibid. 178.

Uncritical Application of Sociological Insights:

David Kettle, in his article engaging with the phenomenon of believing without belonging, warns against the temptation to read off sociological insights as mission directives.[68] This is an important insight. Zygmunt Bauman's description of Liquid Modernity forms the basis of much of the Emerging Church's reflections on postmodernising the church. However, their uncritical 'reading off' of Bauman's work as mission directives does not do justice to Bauman's own ambivalence towards Liquid Modernity. Even a cursory reading of Bauman's almost gloomy picture would leave one to wonder why anyone would want to promote the notion of a Liquid Church.[69] Many Emerging Church authors uncritically engage with Bauman's work to support their predetermined conclusions. However, Bauman is not neutral in regards to Liquid Modernity.

Emerging Church and Missional Church authors argue for the church to reconceive itself around fulfilling the consumptive religious desires of today's spiritual seekers. However, Bauman's work reveals how futile such a reconception of the church would be. Bauman contrasts the former society of producers with today's society of consumers. In the society of producers, people found their identity by what they could produce (on the farm or the battlefield or in the home), goods were valued for their durability, bank books characterised the importance of delaying gratification and lives were built around a coherent story. In today's society of consumers people find their identity in what they consume, goods are valued for their newness and credit cards characterise the way we do not delay gratification but consume the future in advance. Liquid modern life is a nowist life with no coherent story but is rather a series of, often unrelated, 'episodes'.[70] In the society of consumers happiness is to be found in what we consume. Everything, including dissenting voices, is recast as a consumptive product (e.g. eco-friendly washing machines or organic foods). In liquid modernity, even consumers must learn to recast themselves as consumptive commodities to be sold as attractive to the society of consumers in order to keep up

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[68] David Kettle, 'Believing without Belonging? Cultural Change Seen in Theological Context,' *International Review of Mission* 94, no. 375 (2005). 508.
[69] Kees de Groot, 'The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of Liquid Church,' *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006). 95.
[70] Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). 28-38.

with the style pack. Individuals must construct their own identities. This is done through selling yourself by what one wears, owns or consumes. Social networking sites are part of identity construction and selling yourself. *Facebook* allows you to show how many people like you and status updates allow you to sell yourself. The by-line of you tube promises that you can 'broadcast yourself'. The more graphic the detail one shares of one's private experiences and intimate adventures, the more likely one is to stand out from the crowd.[71]

With the constant demand to create your own identity and keep up with the style pack, disposal forms part of the heart of the society of consumers. In liquid modernity there is not only the creation of new needs but also the deliberate uglification of yesterday's goods that have passed their enjoy-by date. Individuals construct their identity through commodities and these must be disposed of when they no longer adorn us or make us desirable commodities.[72] Bauman observes that 'Fraudulent or botched selves need to be discarded on the grounds of their 'non-authenticity', while the search for the real one should go on.'[73] Trading websites, such as New Zealand's Trade-Me website, become graveyards for the disposal of uglified goods. The joy of liquid modernity is that you can be 'born again' many times. However, one *must* keep pace with the 'new and improved' or risk social exclusion. Bauman notes that 'the assertion that 'you *can* make yourself into someone other than you are' is rephrased as 'you *must* make yourself into someone other than you are."[74] The Missional and Emerging Church's emphasis that the church must change or risk social exclusion fits within this broader framework of liquid modern identity formation and the disposal of uglified goods.

Bauman argues that it is not the *state* of happiness that is at the heart of the society of consumers but the *pursuit* of happiness.[75] Whilst the ideal of happiness and satisfaction are the supreme values upheld in the society of consumers, it is the continual non-satisfaction of consumers that keeps it going. In such a society, product deception and a swift transition from shop counter to rubbish bin are signs of good health. Perpetually unfulfilled desires are what drive the irrational 'nowist' society of consumers; the finish line of satisfied desires moves at the same rate as the consumers chasing it.[76] At the heart of liquid

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[71] Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press). 71.
[72] Ibid. 15.
[73] Ibid. 15.
[74] Ibid. 78.
[75] Ibid. 29.
[76] Bauman, *Consuming Life*. 47.

modern culture is not the satisfaction of needs but the creation of desire.[77] The ideal of the church fulfilling the spiritual desires of religious consumers is a futile waste of time because perpetually unfulfilled desire is what keeps the society of consumers going. Whilst the church must undoubtedly renew itself, surely the church must base any renewal on something of more substance than the shifting desires of consumptive culture.

With the Missional and Emerging Church's demand that the church must change to meet the needs of spiritual consumers there is the need to ask critical questions about the nature of the spiritual desires of today's religious tourists and how Christians should engage with them. Simon Barrow points out that the alternative spiritualities espoused today are a long way from Christian orthodoxy. Simon Barrow argues that the much-cited example of the spirituality displayed at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, involved a specifically secular eulogy instead of a sermon, a sentimental devoutly non-religious anthem by Elton John, and a huge outpouring of non-Christian grieving rituals.[78] David Wells argues that the spirituality of today's spiritual tourists bears no resemblance to Christian spirituality. Where traditional Christian spirituality valued sacrifice, discipline and self-abnegation, today's spirituality is about self-realisation and self-discovery. The image of a flighty tourist who is seeking only pleasure and entertainment, picking up on the tidbits of other people's depth, contributing nothing before moving on is, Wells suggests, an apt illustration.[79] This must lead to critical questions as to whether it is a simple issue of supplying what is demanded by religious consumers. Is the Christian missional response to peddle the Christian faith at cut-price rates for spiritual tourists to choose what suits their spiritual hunger? David Kettle, engaging with the phenomenon of 'believing without belonging', reminds missiologists that scripture gives a very different image to that of spiritual consumers shopping for God, 'you did not choose me; I chose you…' (John 15:16).[80]

Pete Ward, drawing on Bauman's work, argues for a radical decentering and reworking of church in terms of 'liquid' networks and

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[77] Bauman, *The Art of Life*. 30.

[78] Simon Barrow, 'From Management to Vision: Issues for British Churches Negotiating Decline and Change,' *International Review of Mission* XCII, no. 364. 9-10.

[79] David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005). 133-34.

[80] Kettle, 'Believing Without Belonging' 515.

flows. However, even a cursory reading of Bauman would observe his own concern about the way liquid modernity recasts relationships as consumptive products that are disposed of easily like any other product. Bauman mourns the replacement of the 'relationships' and 'partnerships' of Solid Modernity with the frail and flimsy 'networks' and 'connections' in Liquid Modernity.

> 'Network' suggests moments of 'being in touch' interspersed with periods of free roaming. In a network, connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will… Unlike 'real relationships', 'virtual relationships' are easy to enter and to exit. They look smart and clean, feel easy to use and user-friendly, when compared with the heavy, slow-moving, inert messy 'real stuff'.[81]

Bauman notes that the ties that bind us together relationally are tied very loosely in a Liquid Modern society so that we can easily connect and disconnect into, and out of, networks. Ideal employees have 'zero drag' in terms of commitment, bonds or emotional attachments and are able to work unusual hours, take on extra assignments and relocate at any time.[82] Noting the growth of online dating services, Bauman states that the joy of Liquid Modern relationships is that 'you can always press delete'.[83] They are freer, lighter and have less mess than the heavy partnerships of solid modernity. Today's Liquid Modern couples are deeply affected by this relational flimsiness as well. Relational challenges become pretexts for breaking off communication and burning bridges. Even the idea of having children must be weighed in consumptive 'value-for-money' terms as children compromise one's autonomy and career prospects – the kind of obligation that is to be avoided at all costs in any Liquid Modern life.[84] Any serious theological engagement with the work of Bauman must surely pause at suggesting, as Ward does, that such relationally frail and flimsy 'networks', based on individual consumptive autonomy, mirror the *perichoretic* relations of the Holy Trinity.

As I have shown, many of Bauman's insights do not support the Emerging Church's reconceptions of church but rather stand as significant critiques. Bauman suggests that a deep fear and insecurity of being left behind the times in a Liquid Modern society drives us on to

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[81] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). xii.
[82] Bauman, *Consuming Life*. 9-10.
[83] Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. xii.
[84] Ibid. 43.

keep pace with progress.[85] This fear is then turned into consumptive products to be purchased by fearful consumers.[86] Connections can be made here to the fear and anxiety that grips the church regarding its decline and demise and the Emerging Church's call for the church to reconceive itself as a postmodern church for a postmodern society. The Emerging Church argues that the church has an image problem and is seen as being embarrassingly behind the postmodern times. It has been left behind by the style pack and has become irrelevant to today's society. De Groot rightly notes that the Emerging Church perceives the problems facing the church today as simply issues of marketing.[87] Drawing on the fear and anxiety that exists within the church in the face of its decline, the Emerging Church then turns this fear back into a consumptive product for the church. Acting as ecclesial style guides, the Emerging Church can teach the ('traditional', 'modern', 'Christendom') church *What Not to Wear* to keep pace with the postmodern times. The church's embarrassing appearance is nothing that an extreme makeover will not fix with the help of the Emerging Church's style gurus. 'Do not fear, this irrelevance is not irreversible', the joy of liquid modernity is always being able to start over, be 'born again', therefore become postmodern.

By viewing culture as both cause *and cure* for the church, the Emerging Church's insights lack a sustained theological engagement with the cultural change and church decline. De Groot captures the comparative stances of Bauman and the Emerging Church in Liquid Modernity well when he writes that the former's message is 'Watch out! Beware liquid modernity!' while the latter's message seems to be 'Behold, society is liquid! Church should be likewise!'[88] The Emerging Church continually reads off sociological insights as missional directives all in the name of relevance. Graeme Redding asks the pertinent theological question; to whom is the church first called to be relevant – to postmodern society or to the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ?[89] I

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[85] Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. 103-104. See Bauman, *Consuming Life*. 103-104.

[86] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006). 7. Bauman gives examples of anti-aging creams, SUVs and clean spring water fresh from the mountains.

[87] de Groot, 'The Church in Liquid Modernity' 99.

[88] de Groot, 'The Church in Liquid Modernity' 99.

[89] Graeme Redding, *Calvin and Café Church: Reflections at the Interface between Reformed Theology and Current Trends in Worship* (2005, accessed 10 July 2007); available from

will later outline an alternative vision of the life of the church as a creature of the word by drawing on the work of John Webster, a British Anglican theologian.

Lack of Theological Engagement:

William Dyrness, in reviewing evangelical books about 'the church', notes that much of the work on the church is not actually about ecclesiology but mission, evangelism or spirituality. 'Church' is whatever shape or trajectory these, often creative, bursts of Christian energy take at a given time.[90] The gaping hole in much of the Missional Church and Emerging Church's creative response to today's cultural climate is theology and specifically ecclesiology. The church is defined primarily in functional terms by what it does to be relevant in mission, rather than in primarily ontological terms by who (or whose) the church is in Christ. The church is whatever mission creates, because what really matters in this conception of church is mission and not church.

James McClendon, an American Baptist theologian, writes that if the church is defined in primarily functional terms then the church can be perceived of little worth in itself other than a mere recruitment agency. When defined in primarily functional terms, the church exists as a means to something it is not and it proclaims a grace it cannot confess because it does not embody that grace.[91] Roland Riem, critiquing the Anglican 'Mission Shaped Church', writes that it is not enough to proclaim that the church has missional values if in the next breath the church is defined as simply a worship style, or restrictively as a blueprint to be avoided for the sake of mission.[92] God's plan for the church is more than simply being a divine recruitment or mission agency; the church is an embodiment of God's cosmic plan to redeem the world in Christ.

The Missional and Emerging Church's sustained emphasis on the church taking up a missional stance to our changing cultural context is

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http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/fileadmin/a_resources_for_ministers/SoM_inaugural_lecture_05.pdf. 2.

[90] William A. Dyrness, 'Spaces for an Evangelical Ecclesiology,' in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Daniel Treier and Mark Husbands (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005). 252.

[91] James Wm. McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994). 439.

[92] Roland Riem, 'Mission-Shaped Church: An Emerging Critique,' *Ecclesiology* 3, no. 1 (2006). 136-37.

important and to be welcomed. However, a strong missional ecclesiology finds its source from a broad *theological* vision of the nature of the church and its role in God's mission, rather than *sociological* directives. Daniel Migliore captures the necessary methodology well.

> Much of what we hear and read about the church is often disappointing because it lacks an explicitly theological dimension. We are overwhelmed with statistical reports, historical surveys, sociological analyses, and church growth proposals. There is no doubt that responsible ecclesiology will need to take such studies into account. Yet the primary task for Christian reflection about the nature and mission of the church, now as ever, is theological.[93]

Sutherland writes that if the church is to fulfil its part in God's mission it must understand the scope of God's mission and understand itself and its role within God's mission. For this to happen ecclesiology must be pursued and pursued vigorously.[94] In what follows, I will seek to vigorously pursue Baptist ecclesiology in order to fill the gaping holes in the analysis of the church in today's current cultural climate. Having explored the Baptist vision of church, I will then use this specifically theological lens to outline a Baptist missional ecclesiology.

II. TOWARDS A BAPTIST MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

The Baptist Vision of Church

In this section I will explore the development of the distinctive Baptist vision of church. In doing so, I will primarily draw on and outline the work of leading British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes.[95]I will outline not

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[93] Daniel Migliore, 'The Missionary God and the Missionary Church,' *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (1998). 14.

[94] Sutherland, 'The Kingdom Made Visible: A Missional Theology of Church.' 2.

[95] Fiddes' most recent work on the Baptist vision of church has been described by one reviewer as 'the most important piece of Baptist ecumenical scholarship for several decades.' See Sean Winter, 'Tracks and Traces: A Review Article,' *Baptist Quarterly* 141, no. 7 (2006). 439. Stephen Holmes calls Fiddes 'the leading British Baptist theologian of recent decades.' Stephen R. Holmes, 'Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology

merely the history of the development of the Baptist vision of church but, more importantly, the theological convictions that underlie the Baptist vision of the church. Central for the Baptist vision is not a distinctive theology but a distinctive ecclesiology.[96] Whilst Baptists share many common Christian theological convictions about the nature of God, 'our account of what the Church is and how it is properly grounded is rather different from most other denominations.'[97] In outlining the Baptist vision of church it will be significant to note the primarily ontological nature of the church and its mission in Baptist ecclesiology. I will use this distinctively theological framework to explore an appropriate ecclesiological response to the current cultural climate.

It is common to speak of key Baptist convictions. Nigel Wright suggests seven core convictions of the Baptist 'genetic code' – the supreme authority of scripture on all of faith and conduct, a believer's church, believer's baptism, the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, freedom of conscience, and separation of church from state.[98] What is significant is not the convictions alone, as Baptists share these with others, but the way Baptists hold these convictions and live them out. As Fiddes asserts, 'the combination or constellation is more distinctive than the single items.' [99] At the centre of Baptist convictions there is a beating heart around which everything else coheres and this beating heart of Baptist convictions is the liberating rule of Christ. And it is this centre that gives the distinctive 'feel' of Baptist congregational life.[100] According to Sutherland, everything in the Baptist vision derives from the dynamic experience of Christ in the

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of God as Missionary,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 no. 1 (2006). 83.

[96] Martin Sutherland, 'On Method: A Baptist *Tikanga*,' in *Talking Theology: 2001-2002 Proceedings*, ed. Martin Sutherland (Auckland: R.J. Thompson Centre for Theological Studies, 2003). 123.

[97] Stephen R. Holmes, 'Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordained Ministry,' in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003). 247.

[98] These titles are taken from Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005). 42-43.

[99] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Theology and the Baptist Way of Community,' in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2000). 28. See also Brian Haymes, 'Theology and Baptist Identity,' in *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 2000). 1.

[100] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle Paternoster Press, 2003). 6.

community.[101] At the heart of the Baptist vision of church is the direct, dynamic and liberating rule of the Risen Christ in the church which liberates the church from all other rules and rulers.

The Historic Baptist Vision of Church

Since the beginning, Baptists have sought to pattern the church on what they believed was outlined in the scriptures. They believed that their vision of church was not merely one way of interpreting the New Testament but possibly the most faithful.[102] The 1644 London Confession is seen by many as the most significant and influential of all of the Baptist confessions. It declared:

> The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not mans inventions, opinions, devices, lawes, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but onely the word of God contained in the Canonicall Scriptures.[103]

Paul Beasley-Murray writes that for Baptists, it is our study of God's Word that leads us to believe that this pattern of church is God's way for living our life together. Baptists are radical believers who believe in getting back to the biblical roots of the Christian faith and being 'the true church'.[104] Today the Baptist claim to be the true church patterned on the New Testament is thankfully much more chastened. Baptists speak of 'a Baptist way of being church' that, as Nigel Wright states, represents a new and welcome degree of modesty. Baptists now acknowledge that there are a variety of patterns and structures for the church in the New Testament.[105]

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[101] Sutherland, 'On Method: A Baptist *Tikanga*.' 127.

[102] Tidball, 'Biblical Foundations' 10-11. See also Derek Tidball, 'Leadership and Baptist Church Governance: Historical Perspectives,' in *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, ed. Graeme Chatfield (NSW: Morling Press, 2005). 24.

[103] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969). 158. Article VII. I have retained the original spelling in all quotations and citations from early Baptist writings.

[104] Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being the Church* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992). 6.

[105] Wright, *Free Church, Free State.* 25.See also Tidball, 'Leadership and Baptist Church Governance: Biblical Foundations.' 14; and Paul S. Fiddes, *A Leading Question: The Structure and Authority of Leadership in the Local Church* (London: Baptist Publications, 1985). 33

Historically, Baptists find their roots in various streams of the dissenting and separatist traditions of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Early in its history the Baptist movement developed into two streams – General Baptists and Particular Baptists. Debate exists as to what influenced the earliest Baptists and to what degree. Most agree that significant among the influences were English Separatism and Continental Anabaptism.[106]

Separatists believed that the church reformers had not sufficiently reformed the church. They regarded the Church of England as unscriptural, corrupt and incapable of reform and that the true church must be separate from the ungodly National Church. They, along with the earliest Baptists, believed that the covenant relationship between God and the National Church was broken and void. English Separatists continued to hold membership in the National Church whilst meeting separately for worship. Despite this membership they were persecuted because of their views and as a result they terminated their membership with the Established Church and began to organise Separatist Churches of their own.[107]

It was from this need to establish separate churches that a Separatist congregation began to meet at Gainsborough. Fiddes argues that the *formative beginnings* for Baptist Christians are found in the Separatist congregation that met in Gainsborough in 1606 or 1607. Whilst not yet a Baptist church, many of the future Baptist leaders, such as John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, were within this congregation and the seeds of the Baptist vision of church were formed here in a gathered covenanting community.[108] Central to the new congregation at Gainsborough was a covenant for the members of the gathered church. William Bradford recalled that the members:

> joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospell, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting.[109]

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[106] Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers*. 112-16. See also Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*. 11-17 and Robert C. Walton, *The Gathered Community* (London: Carey Press, 1946). 62-64.

[107] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*. 97-99.

[108] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 21.

[109] Cited in Paul S. Fiddes, "Walking Together': The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today,' in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in*

Fiddes notes that this covenanting to walk together in the ways of the Lord was at the heart of the Baptist vision and it reveals much about Baptist ecclesiology.[110] The Baptist view of covenanting will be a major theme to which I will return to explore and develop in greater depth.

The Direct, Dynamic and Liberating Presence of the Risen Christ:

A central text for the Baptist vision of church has been Matthew 18. Miroslav Volf notes that the text of Matthew 18 has shaped the entire Free Church tradition.[111] Early Baptists took very seriously the promise that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). This passage led the early Baptists to ask what it meant for Christ to 'dwell in their midst'. They discerned in the phrase an echo of the covenantal language of the Old Testament prophets where God's promise to 'dwell among' people is combined with the formula 'I will be your God and you will be my people'. The gathered local covenanted community understood itself to have the direct, dynamic and liberating presence of the Risen Christ by the power of the Spirit in their midst. This promised presence of the Risen Christ in the gathered church gives the covenanted community all authority of binding and loosing.[112] John Smyth, the pioneering Baptist leader, writes: 'Unto whom the covenant is given unto them the power of binding and loosing is given. The covenant is given to the Body of the Church… therefore the power of binding and loosing is given to them.'[113] As Sutherland argues, the gathered church is therefore both the *site* of Christ's presence and the *means* of discerning his will. This radical emphasis on Christ's promised presence being in the gathered community by the Spirit's power, leads Sutherland to argue that the one true Baptist sacrament is gathering.[114]

Honour of B. R. White, ed. William Brackney and Paul Fiddes (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999).: 47-48. See also Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*. 97-99.

[110] Ibid. 99.

[111] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, ed. Alan G. Padgett, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998). 135.

[112] Paul S. Fiddes, 'A Response to David Carter's Review of *Tracks and Traces*,' *Ecclesiology* 5, no. 1 (2005). 94.

[113] Cited in Roger Hayden, 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions,' in *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission*, ed. Roger Hayden Paul S Fiddes, Richard L Kidd, Keith Clements and Brian Haymes (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1985). 25.

[114] Sutherland, 'On Method: A Baptist *Tikanga*.' 124-27.

The direct, dynamic and liberating presence of the Risen Christ by the power of the Spirit gives the gathered church liberty from all other rules and rulers in order that they may follow only the rule of the Risen Christ who is in their midst. Because of the promised presence of the Risen Christ, the gathered church has all authority to call its own ministry, discipline its members, direct its own affairs and celebrate the sacraments whether there be ordained ministry in the church or not.[115] John Smyth believed the gathered church has 'all power both of the Kingdom and priesthood from Christ'. It has the power to 'preach, pray, sing psalms… and to administer the seals of the covenant: also to admonish, convince, excommunicate, absolve, and all other actions either of the Kingdom or priesthood.'[116] Smyth writes: 'We say the Church or two or three faithful people Separated from the world & joyned together in true covenant, have both Christ, the covenant, & promises, & the ministerial powre of Christ given to them.'[117] Even leadership such as elders, deacons and pastors are all ultimately accountable to the gathered community, for this is where Christ promises to be present by the power of the Spirit. Church officers and leaders have no power of their own other than that entrusted to them by the gathered church who have sought Christ's will in appointing them.[118] Article XXXVI of the 1644 London Confession states: 'That being thus joyned, every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.'[119] This represents a radical departure from the structures and nature of the National Church.

In the light of this, it is easy to suggest that for Baptists the final seat of authority is the gathered covenanted community. Without qualification this is misleading. The gathered church is the final seat of authority only in a secondary and derivative sense. A more precise and accurate definition notes that according to Matthew 18 the authority is

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[115] See Thomas Helwys' *A Declaration of Faith of English People* Article 11 in Lumpkin. *Baptist Confessions*. 120.

[116] Cited in Hayden. 'Baptists, Covenants and Confessions' 25; and see also the 1644 London Confession Article XXXV in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions.* 166.

[117] Cited in Volf, *After Our Likeness*. 132.

[118] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions.* 166.

[119] Ibid. 166.

Christ's authority, discerned and made visible in the gathered church.[120] The final seat of authority is the direct, dynamic and liberating rule of the Risen Christ, present through the power of the Spirit, discerned by the gathered congregation. At its best, the Baptist vision is not about a democracy where majority rules but a Christocracy where Christ reigns and rules in the church and directs it in his ways by the power of the Spirit.

The Baptist Covenanted Community:

Separatist leaders such as Francis Johnston and Robert Browne developed the idea of the church covenanting together.[121] This church covenant served as an instrument for Separatists to mark out the true church from the world and bound the saints together in corporate obedience to the ways of God.[122] The theme of the church covenanting together was a concept which the early Baptist leaders used and developed further. Whilst ecclesiology was central for John Smyth, the divine covenant was central to his ecclesiology.[123] Smyth viewed the church as a visible community of 'two, three, or more saints joined together by covenant with God and themselves… for their mutual edification and God's glory.'[124] Fiddes sees a crucial creative development of covenant theology in early Baptist ecclesiology. Smyth fused together God's eternal covenant of grace with the elect to the covenanting of the local gathered church. The Baptist congregations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries believed that the promise-making of the members of the local church intersected with God's eternal covenant of grace.[125]

In their common life the early Baptists were not merely seeking what they believed was conformity to the divine pattern. They believed

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[120] Sutherland, 'On Method: A Baptist *Tikanga*.' 126.
[121] Fiddes, "Walking Together': The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today.' 47-48.
[122] Stephen Brachlow, 'Life Together in Exile: The Social Bond of Separatist Ecclesiology,' in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999). 115.
[123] B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). 125.
[124] Cited in Ibid. 125.
[125] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 32-34. See also White., *The English Separatist Tradition*. 128.

that in their common life together, as a covenanted community, they experienced the communion of the saints with an intimacy and reality utterly unknown to the casual and undisciplined parish churches around them.[126] However, this profound life together differed significantly from the postmodern thirst for community. Derek Tidball warns that much of the postmodern focus on community sees relationships as an end in themselves. Community has become an aerosol word – '[it is] a nice smell to spray but it dissolves into the air very quickly.'[127] It was not that the early Baptists went in search of community and there they found (or constructed) truth and meaning, it was that they went in search of truth and meaning and there they found community.[128]

In Smyth's vision of covenanting, on the one side, God covenanted to be their God, 'to give Christ' and 'with Christ al els'. Through the covenant bond, 'the Lord chose vs to be his', and 'by vertue of the covenant God made with us…[sic] God is our God & our Father, only in Chr[ist] & through him: & al the promises of God in Christ are yea and Amen.' On the other side, the faithful covenant 'to obey all the commandments of God'.[129] The earliest Baptists believed that their life together, as a covenanted community, was created through the powerful and unifying presence of the Risen Christ by the Spirit's power, who called them into fellowship in and through the covenant relationship they had embraced in faith. Their covenanting together was not simply a human action to be faithful to God and one another, but God covenanting with this gathered community to take them to be God's people.[130]

Therefore, as Fiddes rightly argues, it is positively misleading to understand the church covenant in terms of a voluntary social contract, as if the church is a collection of individuals who have decided to band together.[131] This covenantal understanding stands in contrast to visions of the Missional and Emerging Church of the church as a community

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[126] Keith W. Clements, 'The Covenant and Community,' in *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission*, ed. Roger Hayden Paul S Fiddes, Richard L Kidd, Keith Clements and Brian Haymes (London: The Baptist Union, 1985). 52.

[127] Derek Tidball, 'Leadership and Baptist Church Governance: Contemporary Application,' in *Leadership and Baptist Church Governance*, ed. Graeme Chatfield (NSW: Morling Press, 2005). 46.

[128] Clements, 'The Covenant and Community' 52.

[129] Cited in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 33.

[130] Fiddes, 'Theology and the Baptist Way of Community.' 33.

[131] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 40-44.

that peddles religious goods and services for spiritual consumers to pick and choose from according to their desires. Such views misunderstand the significance of the double meaning of the church covenant – believers certainly gather together in covenant but this is *in response* to being gathered together by Christ, the covenant-mediator, in the Spirit into his one body. It is God who always initiates the covenant and humanity responds.[132]

In the Baptist vision, it is similarly misleading to speak of the autonomy of the local church if this is understood as an isolationist stance in relation to the church universal, because covenant and catholicity belong together. [133] The covenant that the local gathered community participates in is God's eternal covenant with the universal church, which pre-exists any local manifestation of it. The Baptist vision is not the *independence* of the local church but the *liberty* of the local church from all ecclesiastical or other rules so that they may have total dependence on the direct rule of the Risen Christ who is present in their midst by the Spirit's power. In covenanting together, early Baptists held the balance between the privileges of the local church under the rule of Christ on the one hand and the need to seek fellowship, guidance and counsel from the whole body under the rule of Christ on the other. [134]

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[132] This double meaning has also recently been expounded in Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*. 77-78; Wright, *Free Church, Free State*. 49-67; Keith G. Jones, 'Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology,' *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000). 8; and Keith G. Jones, 'Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*,' *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004). 7-8.

[133] See Fiddes' critique of Miroslav Volf's Free Church ecclesiology in Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000). 87-88. See also Fiddes' response to David Carter's view of the excessively voluntaristic and isolationist aspects of the Baptist vision. David Carter and Paul Fiddes, 'Baptist Ecclesiology,' *Ecclesiology* 5, no. 1 (2005). 89. See also Fiddes' response Fiddes, 'A Response to David Carter's Review of *Tracks and Traces*.' 95.

[134] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 32 and 54. Whilst not explicitly using covenant language, the 1644 London Confession follows the 1596 *True Confession* in applying the covenant language of 'walking together' to the associating of local churches. It speaks of each body living under one and the same rule of Christ and members of the one body under Christ their only head. See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. 168-69.

Baptist Covenantal Ontology:

At the heart of this Baptist vision of church is a deep conviction of being called out and gathered together by the Risen Christ, in the power of the Spirit, to be his people. The covenant community understands itself to be the eschatological people of God. As the Spirit of the end brings the new creation into the present, the covenant community have a taste, ahead of time, of the glory of the future kingdom. Fiddes draws on the work of Karl Barth and his doctrine of election and covenant to further enrich the ontological element that is at the heart of Baptist ecclesiology – 'that is the dimension of sheer being which underlies any doing.'[135]

Barth's doctrine of election is based upon his Trinitarian theology. At the centre of Barth's doctrine of election is God covenanting in freedom with humanity through the elect human person of Jesus Christ to be 'God with us'. '[What] unites God and us men is that He does not will to be God without us.'[136] The event of covenanting with the elect human person Jesus Christ in time shapes both the inner being of the Trinity and God's activity in the world. In Jesus Christ, God has elected both humanity and God's own self for covenant communion. In this 'double decree' Jesus Christ is not only the elect human but also the electing God. 'He in whom the covenant of grace is fulfilled and revealed in history is also its eternal basis.'[137] The covenant with Jesus Christ economically is an expression of the eternal covenant of grace God has made with humanity immanently, in the inner communion of the Trinity. Fiddes draws deeply on the work of Barth to enrich his Baptist covenantal ontology:

> [We] might say that as God the Father makes [a] covenant of love eternally with the Son in the fellowship of the Spirit, so simultaneously God makes [a] covenant in history with human beings. In one movement of utter self-giving God elects both the divine Son and human children as covenant partners.[138]

According to Fiddes, the covenant of the local gathered church is bound up with the covenant within God's own life in which God freely determines who God is – God for us. The horizontal human dynamic of covenant making is taken up into the vertical dimension of God's eternal covenant with humanity in Christ. In this way the church participates not

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[135] Ibid. 37.
[136] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. IV/I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956). 7.
[137] Ibid. 66.
[138] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 36.

only in God's covenant with humanity but the inner covenant-making in God. The church shares in the *koinonia* of the divine community and this participation was God's intention from eternity. Fiddes' Trinitarian Baptist ecclesiology is not simply about the activity of God *through* the church but the sharing of the church *in* God.[139] 'Church is what happens when these vectors [the horizontal church covenant and the vertical eternal covenant of grace] intersect, and God in humility opens God's own self to the richness of the intercourse.'[140]

Fiddes goes on to develop an epistemology of participation in contrast to the epistemologies of observation and imitation. These epistemologies, Fiddes argues, view the persons of the Trinity merely as an example of 'being in communion' for the church to imitate.[141] However, language of imitation does not adequately express the ontological depth of the *koinonia* the church experiences with God through covenanting together. For Fiddes, this depth of relationship cannot be objectified. Language of the Trinity is not the language of observation where we try to objectify the Trinitarian relationships and then imitate them in the church. Language of the Trinity must be language of participation that helps us to express our sharing in God. For Fiddes, true ecclesiology is ecclesiology of participation not imitation or observation.[142]

Fiddes uses three key New Testament images of the church (body of Christ; temple indwelt by the Spirit; and the people of God) to help develop a participatory ecclesiology. Having outlined the use of these images in their New Testament context and noted the implications for ecclesiology, Fiddes moves to the broader theological context of what they reveal about the church's relationship to the immanent life of the Trinity.

> The church which acts as body, temple and priestly people in practical ways in the world has the power to serve, to focus the presence of the Spirit and to mediate blessing *only* because it is caught up in the life of the triune God. It does not have its own mission, but shares in the mission of God towards the world, God's ecstatic movement of love which draws the creation into

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[139] Ibid. 78-82. This is a major theme for Fiddes' doctrine of the Trinity and is most fully developed in his major Trinitarian work - Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*.

[140]Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 79-80.

[141] Ibid. 71; 80-82. This participatory epistemology is most fully developed in Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. 34-51.

[142] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 66-71.

> fellowship with God's own self. This movement outwards is an expression of the movements and missions of love within God, in which the church astonishingly is called to share.[143]

Elsewhere he concludes: 'So we may say that the church participates in the external activity of God *because* it shares in the inner life of God.'[144] This captures the ontological nature of the church; the dimension of sheer being that underlies any doing.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

In this final section I conclude by suggesting some alternative implications for missional ecclesiology than those offered by the Missional and Emerging Church. These will flow from the Baptist vision of church developed above.

The Church and the Missio Dei

At the heart of the Baptist vision of church is the deep ontology of the covenanted community as the eschatological people of God. The church, by its participation in God's eternal covenant with humanity in Christ, lives in deep and lasting relationship with one another and the Triune God – the end for which the world was created. Such ontological depth and richness defines the church as not merely the agent for the *missio Dei* but its embodiment. In his essay on missional ecclesiology, having explored a variety of New Testament texts, Sutherland defines the *missio Dei* as the cosmic plan of God to bring creation into perfect harmony with Godself, thus reflecting the perfect harmony that the three persons of the Trinity subsist in.[145] This cosmic plan of complete reconciliation of the universe with its creator was triumphantly demonstrated in the coming of Christ where God's eternal plan was enacted in time. Drawing on Romans 8:14-25 and Ephesians 3:1-21, Sutherland then argues for the cosmic role of the church as an integral part of God's cosmic plan. Christians have been reconciled to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. In Ephesians 3 Paul writes that the one wise purpose of God, to reconcile all things through Christ, has now come to clear expression in

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[143] Ibid. 73.
[144] Ibid. 72.
[145] Sutherland, 'The Kingdom Made Visible: A Missional Theology of Church.' 3-5.

the church.[146] Thus, God's cosmic plan is fulfilled *in the church*. The church by its *nature* displays the new creation to the universe. Fiddes, reflecting on the difference of the Trinitarian persons, goes so far as to say: 'There is only truly church when the assembly is made up of the old and the young, employed and unemployed, male and female, black and white, healthy and handicapped.'[147] Sutherland notes the benediction in Ephesians 3:21 amazingly states that God may be glorified in the church as well as in Christ.[148]

The church participates in God's glory, manifesting the firstfruits of the *missio Dei*, displaying to the universe God's plan for its future and God's own divine nature. The church is the firstfruits of God's cosmic plan (the *missio Dei*) and gives a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth by its very life and being. Mission is therefore not primarily something we *do* but something we *are*. 'As the *koinonia* – the 'common life' – is created by the Spirit, the Church prefigures the end. More than that, it is the eternal reality of the Triune God entering time.'[149] In this way we can link the *missio Dei* with the coming reign of God. Whilst the kingdom is not yet the church's possession, and the true church is yet to come, the church, in time, is nonetheless a foretaste and a sign of God's coming kingdom.[150]

This primarily ontological vision of the mission of the church stands in contrast to the Missional Church and Emerging Church's primarily functional understandings of the mission of the church. In the Missional Church's conception, the *missio Dei* is a functional concept that sends the church out to *do* mission. 'The center or core of the *missio Dei* is evangelization: the communication of the gospel.'[151] In this conception, not only is the *missio Dei* a call for the church to do mission, but also the *missio Dei* now becomes the domain of the church to carry out. 'This risen Lord now sends his disciples into the world to carry out the *missio Dei* (mission of God) that was the purpose and content of his

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[146] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990). 187. See also N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002). 34-38.

[147] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*. 81.

[148] Sutherland, 'The Kingdom Made Visible: A Missional Theology of Church.' 6.

[149] Sutherland, 'Pine Trees and Paradigms: Rethinking Mission in the West '. 148.

[150] Sutherland, 'The Kingdom Made Visible: A Missional Theology of Church.' 6.

[151] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. 49.

life, death, and resurrection.'[152] Such anthropocentric definitions of the *missio Dei* confuse the role and nature of the church in the mission of God and ultimately misunderstand the mission of God. The church does not have a separate mission of its own nor does it continue on the mission of God nor does it complete Christ's ministry. John Webster argues that '[much] church life is predicated on the assumption that God is only real, present and active in so far as the church's moral action or spirituality or proclamation make him so. Not only is this a (covert or explicit) denial of the resurrection; it is a miserable burdening of the church with a load which it cannot hope to support.'[153] Rather, the church participates through the Spirit in the ongoing ministry and mission of Christ given to him by the Father that is eschatologically complete.[154]

A clearer understanding of the role of the church in God's mission will help to sharpen and strengthen Missional and Emerging ecclesiologies. Webster argues that because the gospel is independent of the church, precedes it and calls it into being, the church is not in its creaturely capacity the primary bearer of responsibility for witness to the gospel. God is the first witness to the gospel, whose sum and substance is Jesus Christ. 'In the power of his resurrection and in the energy of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ goes ahead of the church and testifies of himself in the world… He – not the church – is the true witness. He – not the church – is the light of the world.'[155] The primary agent of the church's witness is God in the Risen Christ through the Spirit's power. 'God's own witness does not dissolve into that of the church; the church does not replace him, but simply witnesses to the witness.'[156] The *missio Dei* is the mission of *God* and not the mission of the church. To assert that the church continues the *missio Dei,* picking up where Christ left off, is to fundamentally confuse whose mission it is. The church most certainly has a role in witness and mission but it does not bear the weight of the *missio Dei.* The church is called, by its life together, to give witness to the reconciling power of Christ by the power of the Spirit – a witness to the witness.

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152 Ibid. 46. See also Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.*

153 John Webster, 'The Church as Witnessing Community,' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 3 (2003). 31.

154 Holmes, 'Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordained Ministry.' 253-54.

155 Webster, 'The Church as Witnessing Community,' 31.

156 Ibid. 30-31.

The Community of the Gospel

In his conception of the church's role in witness, Webster makes a crucial distinction between the church and the gospel. He defines the gospel as 'the announcement of the eschatological reality of God and God's saving governance of all things', whose sum and substance is Jesus Christ.[157] He argues that the gospel precedes the church, calls the church into being, sustains the church in its life and summons the church to bear witness to the gospel. The church is what it is because of the gospel; it is a community of the gospel. 'The church of Jesus Christ is a creature of the Word, and in the power of the Spirit it lives from the Word. That is, it comes into being and is sustained through the word of the gospel spoken by the living Christ.'[158] Importantly, therefore, the church can never assume that it has learned and put its character as the gospel community safely behind it. The church is always a beginner when it comes to the gospel.[159] The church can only be what it is if its entire life and activity emerges out of giving first attention to Jesus Christ – there is simply nowhere else to begin.[160] The church learns its nature and its calling by sitting in the school of the gospel, there to learn of the ways and love of God.[161] To do this, the church gathers together around the magnetic presence of the Risen Christ to be renewed by his gospel of grace. 'The church hears the gospel in the repeated event of being encountered, accosted, by the word of the gospel as it meets us in the reading of Scripture in the midst of the community of faith and its worship.'[162] This gathering together is not a Modernist obsession for logocentrism, as the Missional and Emerging Church argue, but the crucial conviction that the critique for the church and its nature comes from *within*, from the Risen Christ, rather than from *without* through culture. Therefore the church will gather (or be gathered together) to sit at the feet of Jesus and be accosted by him.

This has implications for the church's mission to the world. It will mean that the church will adopt a rather free and sometimes unimpressed attitude to other voices that clamour for its attention as it tries to live its life as God's eschatological community. Because the

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157 Ibid. 22.

158 John Webster, 'Discipleship and Calling,' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 23, no. 2 (2005). 145.

159 Webster, 'The Church as Witnessing Community.' 23.

160 Ibid. 21.

161 Webster, 'Discipleship and Calling.' 146.

162 Webster, 'The Church as Witnessing Community.' 24.

church has placed Jesus Christ as the centre of all its life, it will not be too affected by what it is told. The calming centre of identity in Christ, which is at the heart of the church's life, will not allow the church to be trapped into constantly reinventing itself to keep up with the styles of the world. As Webster notes, an excitable and unstable church cannot properly minister the gospel, and stability comes from constant, patient attention to Christ and his Word.[163] This does not mean the church will ignore or withdraw from the world; it will listen carefully and courteously but it will not be mesmerised by what the world says.[164]

> It is simply to say that the gospel outbids the world every time. Jesus himself speaks more authoritatively, legitimately, winningly and interestingly than the world. If the church really loves the world, then the church will give its mind to listen to Jesus' prophetic presentation of himself; it will attend to the gospel, not as something it knows but as something it must always learn. Hearing the gospel will help the church to help the world. It will enable the church to see the world without the masks which the world puts on to hide from things which it fears or hates or longs for but dare not face.[165]

In the Baptist vision of church, gathering together as the gospel community is not about being inwardly focussed, nor is it about insulating and inoculating spiritually over-weight Christians as it is accused of by many in the Missional and Emerging Church.[166] It is about the Risen Christ gathering the covenanted community together, by the power of the Spirit, as the eschatological people of God, liberated from all other rules, to find our only true centre – Jesus Christ. Any undermining of the significance of gathering together for the sake of being relevant or missional, tears the heart out of the Baptist self-understanding as the eschatological people of God who are gathered together through the Risen Christ, in the Spirit, and formed by his powerful Word. Whilst such radical reconceptions of church might be culturally and sociologically expedient, they are theologically bankrupt in the Baptist vision of church.

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[163] Webster, 'Discipleship and Calling.': 145.
[164] Ibid. 145.
[165] Ibid. 145.
[166] Allis, 'Has the Church had Its Day?' 17.

Thanatophobia

It has been noted that much of the ecclesiology espoused by the Missional Church and the Emerging Church is in response to the decline of the church in the West. Such decline creates significant anxiety and fear within the church regarding its future. Some authors have observed that this deep fear and anxiety can drive the church to uncritically adopt many of the various fads that sweep through the church promising statistical success.[167] The Missional Church and the Emerging Church often heighten this fear of the church's decline and irrelevance in order to present their reconceptions of church as the cure that will save the church from its statistical decline. As noted earlier, this mirrors the way in which fear is recast as a product (or products) in liquid modern society.

Michael Jinkins, in his helpful book, calls this fear and anxiety *thanataphobia* – a fear of dying.[168] In contrast to the *thanataphobia* that grips much of the work of the Missional Church and Emerging Church, Jinkins sees the church's decline and possible death as a gift, giving the church an unparalleled opportunity to comprehend and to render its life. 'When the church faces death, in point of fact, it encounters a critical moment when it may know the power of the resurrection.'[169] The church's life does not depend on its own competence, expertise, planning or relevance, the 'church's life depends on the power and faithfulness of God to raise the Body of Christ from every death, because its life is a continuing participation in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.'[170]

Jinkins asks, can we not imagine announcing in word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture held captive by consumerism? Can we not imagine proclaiming the good news that people are neither consumers nor products to be sold? It will be very difficult for the church to proclaim this gospel convincingly if it too gives in to the temptation to repackage itself as just another commodity. Finally, Jinkins asks, can we not imagine a church that is attractive to others because it does not desperately need them for its institutional survival? A church living in fear for its own self-preservation does not draw others to it, but

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[167] See especially Ian Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism*, ed. Andrew Walker, Deep Church (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004). 3-31.
[168] Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context*. 27.
[169] Ibid. 13-14.
[170] Ibid. 28.

a church that courageously holds up the cross of Christ in its corporate life has, as St. John tells us, the power to draw all humanity.[171] The idea that we have to 'save' the church by making it relevant to the world is dead wrong. The church already has a saviour and he knows his way out of the grave. Chesterton once said 'Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a god who knew the way out of the grave.'[172] It is when the church, unconcerned about its survival, recklessly gives itself over to Christ and trusts in his resurrecting power to bring it out of all deaths that it is most attractive.

Conclusion: Be the Community

I have argued that the Missional Church and the Emerging Church, through their desire for cultural relevance, define the church in primarily functional terms; the church is whatever makes it relevant to culture in mission. However, to define the church primarily on these terms is to misunderstand the nature and scope of the church in God's cosmic plan and to rob it of its glory. What defines the church and its mission is not what the church does to be culturally relevant but who the church is in Christ – the fulfilment of God's cosmic plan and a sign of God's kingdom. Therefore, the church's mission is to *become what God has made it*. This is not a call for passive inaction on the church's part, but a call to a specific type of action that flows out of who it is. In the Baptist vision, the church is never less than mission activity, but it is certainly much more.

The church is called to indwell its nature as the first fruits of God's cosmic plan and a sign of God's kingdom. As a sign of God's kingdom the church must be careful as to what it signifies. The church is to 'live in such a way as to display the dawning of the redemptive reign of God.'[173] As Sutherland argues: 'The missional church (and there is no other kind) exists to make the kingdom visible.'[174] The mission imperative is for the church to *be the community* of God's kingdom and

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[171] Jinkins, *Stewards of the Mysteries of God's Church*. 28-30.
[172] G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925): 162.

[173] K. J. Vanhoozer, 'Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel,' in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. R. Parry and A. West C. Bartholomew (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003). 92.
[174] Sutherland, 'The Kingdom Made Visible: A Missional Theology of Church.' 7.

therefore, in its corporate life together, make God's kingdom visible. When understood in its full significance, making God's kingdom visible is a severe vision. It is a call to radically and recklessly indwell its nature as the fulfilment of the *missio Dei* and fearlessly hold fast to Christ and his ways, no matter what. It is a call to be God's contrast community of redemption, a sign to the world of God's redemptive plan to reconcile all things in Christ. This is the historic Baptist vision of being a community of radical disciples. This will have significant mission repercussions as the church learns sacrificially to love and to live in such a way as to make God's kingdom visible.

There is clearly rich and disturbing potential in the Baptist vision of church. We are called to explore what it means to make God's kingdom visible, corporately, as a contrast community.[175] Such a corporate vision of witness and mission stands against the many individualistic visions that dominate the church. The church witnesses to Christ by its radical life together as God's covenanted contrast community – the fulfilment of the *missio Dei* and a sign of God's kingdom.

Bauman concludes:

> If there is to be a community in the world of the individuals, it can only be (and it needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right.[176]

Far from resigning the church to irrelevance, fearlessly *being* the eschatological community of the gospel enables the church to be relevant to Christ and therefore relevant to the deepest longings of our world. When witness and mission are understood as the church's radical life together, there is tremendous missional potential. Bauman's hope for community in the society of individuals resonates deeply with the corporate Baptist vision of the church as God's covenanted contrast

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[175] Examples such as Clarence Jordan's *Koinonia Farms* and Tim Costello's ministry at St. Kilda Baptist among the urban poor stand out for their focus on the church *being* the people of God. For the life of Clarence Jordan and the community of Koinonia Farm, see James Wm. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974). 112-139. See also Tim Costello, *Streets of Hope: Finding God in St. Kilda* (Melbourne: Albatross Books, 1998).

[176] Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). 149-50.

community who are gathered together by the Risen Christ in the power of the Spirit, liberated from all other rules and free to be truly human – that is, being in deep *koinonia* with God, and one another.

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