

Is 'Church' a valuable term in relation to fresh expressions?¹

In Durham in 2010 I picked up, at a conference for research into fresh expressions, that for some people the very term 'church' is seen as so inherently problematic, as to want to avoid using it beside the words 'fresh expression'. Their serious suggestion was that what we are seeing should be called 'fresh expressions of mission'. Furthermore some felt the downward dragging gravitational pull from inherited, traditional, institutional, understandings of Church is so extreme as to make escape from these unhelpful assumptions unlikely, if not impossible.

While sympathetic to the problems, I am entirely unconvinced by this and want to construct an alternative view. However, be clear what I am not saying. I hold no brief for insisting that the very word 'church' is sacrosanct. The early Christians' selection and adaptation of the secular word *ecclesia* is good ground for this. In certain mission contexts it will be right not to use this 'C' word. That however is very different from thinking we are free to abandon the theological reality, to which many local churches too often lamely point, or worse call into disrepute.

There is another reasonable factor about being coy in using the 'church' word. I have already written in *Encounters On The Edge* no. 33 that some examples launched from existing churches can be more accurately called 'fresh expressions of public worship'.² I also have plenty of incidences of local churches re-badging existing midweek services and children's work as fresh expressions of Church. However, I doubt they are notably 'fresh' or 'missional' and in some cases nor are they fully ecclesial.

I find it helpful to continue to differentiating what we see. Some other things are laudable 'fresh expressions of evangelism'. Historically speaking this is true of Alpha, when compared to a Billy Graham rally. But if the group doing that evangelism are part of an existing local church, and they hope, pray and intend, that enquirers and converts should join that existing church, then it is an outreach project, not a fresh expression of Church. Claire Dalpra has done seminal work on the difference between these two kinds of mission. She isolated two diagnostic tests:

- 1 A fresh expression of church does not intend to be a bridge back, or a transition to, an existing church, as does outreach, but is an end point in itself.
- 2 The motive and aim in a fresh expression is inculturation of the sent Christians to a context in which they act as guests not hosts, rather than assimilation of indigenous people to a prior church context through an outreach project.

Thirdly, beyond this in differentiating what we see growing up, there are some promising stories of what I term 'fresh expressions of developing community'. Church Army's Research Unit's understanding is that these may well be at early stage of becoming a fresh expression, and depending on its internal dynamics could be embryonic church.

There is a real question here of accurately describing the work that Christians are doing and not all of it is church, or even trying to be. But this suggestion which I heard in Durham goes way beyond that. It focuses a trend I see cropping up more widely among mission-minded people, and among those whose past experience of the church has been significantly negative. Dan Kimball has a book title. *They like Jesus but Not the Church*. There might be plenty of reasons why.

¹ Given at the Diocesan Missioners Conference of 2011

² G. Lings, *Encounters on the Edge* No. 33 Café Church: Caffeine croissants and Christ? (Church Army, 2007).

The shame and down drag of the church

Jonathan Wilson in a 1997 slim volume, and its the 2nd edition, building on Alasdair MacIntyre's 1984 book *After Virtue*, which he called *Living Faithfully* writes:

... the church's history was already a problem in western culture – the Crusades, witchcraft trials, support for slavery and more were perceived by the culture as arguments against the truth of Christianity ... Since that first edition the situation has gotten worse.³

All of us could add our own horror stories –our own or those that have happened to others. Many would be more local and personal than Wilson's big picture historical comments. We know the shame of the church. It is our shame and at points we have probably all been complicit in and perhaps long to disassociate ourselves.

I recognize too, as part of the Church Army, that many evangelists or missionaries are already in rapid retreat from the Church. It is the last place they want to be. They find it fussy, introverted, deadening, stifling; and they like being out there with the people.

However, such problems and instincts I think leads Wilson to overstate.

The church is a human community called into existence by God and sustained by God as a witness to the Gospel, but the church is not the Gospel.⁴ The church's only reason for existence is as a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵

He is not alone in this kind of thought. Take Martyn Atkins' view – for which he is upbraided by Davison and Milbank in *For the Parish*.⁶

... being mission minded is the highest and proper calling of the Church, and through it the Church finds its best reason for being.⁷

This raises two rather different questions, and consequent routes:

- 1 Is the church so tarnished, corrupt and broken that we are better to continue with a churchless mission?
- 2 Can the essence of the church be redeemed by an insistence on its missional character?

Unless there are good answers, then why should we talk in generic terms about fresh expressions of Church, even though it may be a love-hate relationship that we have with the Church? Come to that, why should mission minded people bother with the Church; why not cut the Gordian knot and focus everything on mission?

My reasons are drawn from scripture, elements in the tradition of theological thought, reason, and experience.

³ J. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a fragmented world* (Cascade Books, 2010) , p. 2

⁴ Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, p. 3.

⁵ Wilson, *Living Faithfully*, p. 5.

⁶ A. Davison and A. Milbank, *For the Parish* (SCM, 2010) p. 52.

⁷ M. Atkins in Croft (ed) *Mission shaped Questions* (CHP, 2008) p. 22

1 Scripture

1.1 Clues from how Yahweh operates

My reading of the Old Testament tells me that God's preferred way of mission is through his people. From the very first God chose to work with and through those created to be in his image; Adam and Eve are to look after the creation and be the most characteristic sign of God's presence in the world. That is part of what image is about. Next in the story of a mission which is universal in scope, it is diagnostic that the nations will be blessed through Abraham and his seed. This covenant with Abraham occurs five times with variants in Genesis as a whole,⁸ showing its centrality. It includes the promise 'all nations will be blessed through you', a phrase that Chris Wright calls 'a pivotal text'. Wright goes as far as saying 'From a missiological perspective, the covenant with Abraham is the most significant of all the biblical covenants.'⁹ Much later on, within the Exilic literature, this universal mission call is refocused, as God's servant is called to be 'a light to the nations.'¹⁰ Of course God is free to work outside that parameter of his people, as with Cyrus who is also called a servant, but that freedom does not remove them as a major strand of his mission, as God promised to Abraham.

The language of 'my people' is characteristic of the Jews. There are over 200 occurrences between Exodus and Zechariah. Their role was to be the community and location where God is normally to be found. This raises the scandal of particularity, as per the aphorism: 'how odd of God to chose the Jews.' This is made worse in that they often failed to deliver this promise. However, it did not take away either their identity or their high calling, although it did bring periods of judgment, most notably in the exile. This very pattern of exalted purpose and debased performance bears upon the Church's current state. Election and failure is not a new problem.

Part of the glue that holds this tension together is that covenants are God's characteristic way of establishing relationships. A number of them are known by the name of person with whom they were made; with Noah, Abraham, David. As such, making covenants is foundational to the understanding of salvation. The gracious liberating sovereign acts of God create a committed bond to and with a group of people, who become his.

Abraham has lasting significance as the first patriarch. The Old Testament is full of references to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the promises made to them. Sometimes this is shortened to reference to Abraham alone.¹¹ His founder status is without question, and Jewish identification with him is so instinctive that one designation of being Jewish is being called children of Abraham. What is true for Abraham has important significance for his descendants. Patterns set for Abraham have normative significance for those now entitled to call themselves the people of God. Expressing that same continuity, Newbigin writes 'The whole core of biblical history is the story of the calling of a visible community to be God's own people, His royal priesthood on earth, the bearer of His light to the nations... and the same is true in the New Testament'.¹²

To that we now turn.

⁸ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (IVP, 2006) p. 194.

⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 327.

¹⁰ Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6.

¹¹ For example Pss. 105:42, 2 Chron. 20:7 or Isa. 41:8 where Abraham is given the rare term being described as a friend of God, Neh. 9:7 where the following verses then move directly to the Exodus.

¹² L. Newbigin, *The Household of God* (originally SCM, 1953: now Paternoster, 1998) p. 24.

1.2 Lessons from Christ and his Church

I am not impressed by those who claim Christ never intended to create a faith community centred in him. The choice of twelve disciples in a Jewish context is too revealing. Moreover, driving a wedge between Jesus' command to his followers to make disciples and what came to be called the 'church' is an artificial one. Historically, there was a period of uncertain evolution from the first to the second, including the decoupling of the early Jesus community from being just Jewish. Various epistles handle this transition including Galatians 3-4 and Romans 9-11. But theologically there is an underlying continuity. Those following Jesus are called by grace, through faith, into corporate covenant with God, as the people of God. Rowan Williams explored the question 'when does the Church begin?' at the 2011 Fresh Expressions conference in Oxford. It was very clear he pushes answers way before Pentecost and back towards Creation.

The playing down of church in favour of either mission or the kingdom sometimes relies on misuse of the 1902 quotation from Alfred Loisy: 'Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and what came was the Church'¹³ suggesting he was disappointed that Jesus preached the Kingdom and the Church was the result. Some weighty figures do interpret this in a negative sense, like Bosch in a section entitled 'Where the early church failed.'¹⁴ However by contrast, Kung prefaces the Loisy citation with this question. 'Are we forced to agree with the ominous and often quoted comment?'¹⁵ He then argues that the origins of the Church are not found 'in the pre-Easter period, but in the whole *history of Jesus' life and ministry.*' So he makes the person of Jesus, 'the roots of the Church'.¹⁶ Both the ecumenist Eric Jay and the Catholic Encyclopedia support this positive view.¹⁷ They argue that while Loisy's modernism was condemned in 1907,¹⁸ he himself saw his remark as a positive and necessary development of an organism.

By the time the letter to the Ephesians was written the links between Christ and the Church are deep, strong and even surprising to some. If there is one image of the Church for which Ephesians is noted, it is that the Church is to be seen as 'the body of Christ.'¹⁹ Thus if orthodoxy rightly has a high Christology then this elevates one's assumptions of the Church. It is odd to venerate the head²⁰ and despise the body, although, when confronted with a paraplegic church, you can emotionally understand the error.

The expectations within Ephesians chapter 3 are also high. 'His intent was that now, through the Church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known ...' Part of this is the disclosure of a mystery,²¹ that Jews and Gentiles, that is insiders and outsiders, are reconciled to God in Christ and to one another in the one *body*.²² This thought is related to what follows later in chapter 3. 'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, (no surprises so far) to him be glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus to all generations ...'²³ What a connection and what a surprising order of words, what a high doctrine of the Church.

¹³ A. Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (Picard, 1902), p. 111. Translations from the French vary.

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 50-52. K. Giles *What on earth is the Church?*, p. 26 reads Loisy in a similar negative way.

¹⁵ Kung, *The Church*, p. 43. His own footnote makes it explicit that Loisy meant it as 'a positive statement.'

¹⁶ Kung, *The Church*, p. 76. This is a key sentence in his investigation of the critical scholarship debate lying beneath kingdom and Church questions, pp. 43-79.

¹⁷ E. G. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* Volume. 2. *1700 to the Present Day* (SPCK, 1978), p. 20, 'the Church ... developed under the guidance of Holy Spirit.' Catholic Encyclopaedia: in its article on the Church, sub section 4, the Organisation by the Apostles.

<http://www.catholicity.com/encyclopedia/c/church>, accessed on 15th June 2005.

¹⁸ Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* Vol. 2, p. 20.

¹⁹ The phrase 'the body of Christ' occurs at verses 1:23 2:16 3:6 4:4 4:12

²⁰ Ephesians 1:22 & 5:23.

²¹ Ephesians 3:9 & 5:32.

²² Ephesians 2:16.

²³ Ephesians 3:10 & 20-21 – my italics

Going on in the same epistle, I spot another reason why I am never free to dispose of the Church. As the author put it, ‘Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.’ Within sentences he goes on to tease that love out, explaining that Christ nourishes and cherishes the Church as a human being does their own body.²⁴ Does our talk about the Church often reflect this dignity of identity and purpose? Has it all been eroded through failed expectations? Has the Church itself succumbed to ecclesial Alzheimers and forgotten its identity, become dysfunctional, descended into inconsequential self-absorbed trivialities and become an object of palliative care? Worse has it become the enemy, usually referred to as ‘them.’ By contrast, Paul who already had plenty of examples of tacky churches to deal with is breathtakingly audacious about the linkage between Christ, the Church and God’s mission.

A congruent witness is Alister MacGrath. He mentions five New Testament models of church, all of which assume connection between church and mission. Firstly, the church, as the people of God, emphasises continuity with Israel (1 Peter 2: 9). Secondly, the church as a community of salvation called into existence by God’s work and existing to do God’s work (Mathew 5: 13–16). Thirdly, the church as the body of Christ; this is found particularly in the Pauline letters (1 Corinthians 12: 12–31). Fourthly the church, as servant people, is chosen for the purpose of making Christ known (2 Corinthians 4: 5). Lastly, he talks of the church as the community of the Spirit – a sign of God’s kingdom now and the restoration to come (Ephesians 4: 30).²⁵

Similar work about the Spirit and the Church could be done. This would include how the Spirit inhabits the Church, transforms and inspires the Church, as well as surprising and alarming her. In summary, Scripture strongly suggests that the mission of God and the people of God are not only inherently linked but there is mutuality in that link. So Newbiggin writes:

... we must insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so we must also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate.²⁶

2 Theological Tradition

2.1 Trinity and Missionary Ecclesiology

It is a helpful truism that the best theology starts with the topic of God. So the first quotation in the theological chapter of *Mission-shaped Church* reads. ‘Any theology of the church must ultimately be rooted in the Being and Acts of God.’²⁷

The report continues

When Christians speak of ‘God’, it is as shorthand for the Holy Trinity. Two things follow from this. First, God has to be understood relationally and communally. ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who mutually indwell one another, exist in one another and for one another, in interdependent giving and receiving.’²⁸ Second, God is a missionary. We would not know God, if the Father had not sent the Son in the power of the Spirit.²⁹

²⁴ Ephesians 5:25 & 5:29.

²⁵ A. McGrath, , *Christian Theology*. (Blackwell: 2007) pp. 392–393.

²⁶ Newbiggin, *The Household of God*, p. 200-201.

²⁷ *Mission-Shaped Church* p. 84, citing the House of Bishops: *Eucharistic Presidency* (CHP, 1997) para 2.2.

²⁸ Citing *Eucharistic Presidency*, para, 2.6.

²⁹ *Mission-shaped Church* (CHP, 2004) pp. 84-85.

If I then put those two factors – God as communal and missional - together it becomes sense to describe God the Trinity as community-in-mission. It is both helpful and necessary to combine the insights of the 70 year old strand of *Missio Dei* thinking³⁰ with the thought of the Orthodox like Lossky and then Zizioulas in *Being as Communion*.³¹ If we do that task of combining these influential theological rediscoveries, that have sadly largely remained disconnected from each other, then to approach understanding God as Community-in-Mission becomes both plausible and helpful.

Both factors, the communal and the missional, are true and enduring within God; but notice the order of the words in the phrase. It reflects that the Being of God is chronologically prior to the Acts of God. The Trinity are to be thought of as being communal before they act in a missional way. That is not how some pioneers, missiologists or evangelists naturally think. They want to go straight to the missional. They feed off the welcome rise of *Missio Dei* thinking as though it is the bottom line and that it justifies making mission central in all their activity. But note another quote from *Mission-shaped Church*. “Mission comes from the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit”.³²

The words ‘Mission comes’ tells us that it comes from something else. If it comes from something else, it cannot be the starting point. This runs contrary to what a lot of respectable books by mission minded people will tell us; take the view of highly respected Eddie Gibbs. I quote from his book following Church Next, called *Leadership Next*.

“The church must re-establish the priority of the Great Commission. It is the Lord’s mandate that *defines* [his italics] the church as people who follow Christ ... with a vision for Christ’s reign on earth. It also drives the church to turn from an inward focus that invites the world to come, to a church that disperses to ... every power centre and every segment of culture.”³³

I agree with Eddie Gibbs’ earlier words that the church needs to repent of “moral failure and missional ineptitude”. However, I do not believe that our distortions and failures should make us overbalance in the other direction that makes mission primary to our identity. Mission does not define the church, though it is an intrinsic activity of the church. In the life of God, it is the same. Mission flows out of how God is, the Trinity are community-in-mission.

So Theologians rightly teach that the immanent trinity is chronologically prior to the economic trinity. In ordinary language that is saying, the being of God is prior to the activity of God. Being comes before doing. In the same way, it is always a mistake to think people can derive their identity from their activity. Being busy is not purpose. Even being purposeful does not account for who we are. It is who we are that determines what we should do. We must always take those categories in that order. Church and all those who are its evangelists or pioneers, who cannot be separate from Church, and are specialists within it, are to express the same dynamics.

However, we must not overbalance, for the danger then is to assume that community or communion is to do with being, but that the missional dimension is only functional or subsequent activity. I wish to assert that God is in himself, or ontologically, missional. We must not divide the immanent and economic trinity.

³⁰ This is summarised by Bosch in *Transforming Mission* (Orbis, 1992) pp. 389-93.

³¹ Zizioulas J, *Being as Communion* (St Vladimir Press, 1997)

³² Cray, *Mission-shaped Church* p. 85.

³³ Gibbs E, *Leadership Next* (IVP, 2005) p. 89.

Yet this discussion raises something which is helpfully odd. We desperately need a *Mission-shaped Church*. But to really discover the best way to be Mission-shaped, and to be the church God intends, means we should *not* start with mission. The Trinity show us that mission itself is not the starting point. Mission itself overflows from the loving community life of God. This bears on one of my original questions. ‘Can the essence of Church be redeemed by an insistence on its missional character?’ Put another way is taking on board *Mission Dei* enough? I believe the answer is no, because it fails to do justice to the normative example and normative theological principle derived from our understanding of the Trinity.

If I offer a crude analogy you may see what I mean. Liken the Church to an old Morris Minor and an image of attractive quaintness bumbles across the screen of the mind, but it is one that is limited for contemporary transport and long distance trips. Offer to add power to the beast by dropping in a BMW 2 litre engine and there would be dramatic changes. I would however have questions about the suspension, brakes, steering and seating cabin. Adding the woof of mission to a clapped-out Church is about the same sort of change. The need today is much deeper and more radical. I use radical to mean the search for roots. Our Christian roots are in who and how God is - Community-in-mission.

If I were asked what one phrase best sums up all I have learnt in the 20 years of the research life of Church Army’s Research unit, I have little doubt what it would be. ‘The centrality of community’ are the words I would choose. Here the argument from experience plays some part. I have seen it manifested as the fresh starting point in mission, arrived at intuitively by pioneers wanting to connect with those furthest away from us in our mission fields. I have then noticed that this dynamic, of growing community, works for mission to all sectors of society, not just those furthest away. Few people hate being loved. Truly loving accepting community is always attractive and also demanding. So Graham Tomlin has written a commendable book; *The Provocative Church*. Take one quote about a problem about the Church:

It’s not so much a lack of truth... but a missing connection between the words uttered and the style of life that results from it: a lack of authenticity, of depth, of correlation between words images and reality³⁴.

Evangelism can work when local church life makes watching people ask questions. I have also learnt that community was the most effective and enduring dynamic in the missionary life of the early church. The study that made me change my mind is Alan Kreider’s *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*.³⁵ As such, we are only rediscovering old ways, part of what ‘fresh’ means.

Kreider demonstrates that the early effective way in mission was a people, a community who lived a Jesus shaped distinctiveness. This was fed by the practices of their spiritual lives. They did little direct evangelism and banned outsiders from coming to worship. That is utterly different our investment in the so-called shop window of the church. Beyond this, more recently, I have come to see that this emphasis on community is not merely tactical wisdom, and ancient practice, though it is both of those. The centrality of community connects with the deepest strands of our theology. Who God is, and what the Trinity show us they are like, is foundational for being Christian and being Church.

³⁴ Tomlin G, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, 2002) p. 10.

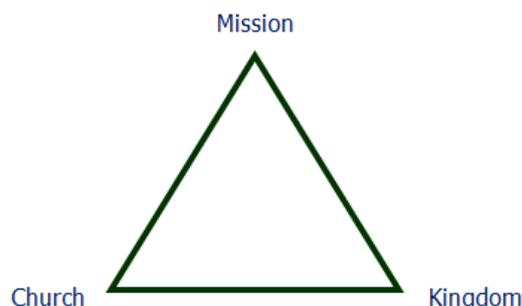
³⁵ A. Kreider, Grove Liturgical Studies No. 32 *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Grove Books, 1995).

2.2 Theological connections with Mission and Kingdom

I now want to divert from the inherited tradition and dare to speculate with you. I aim to set Church as part of a triangle of three interrelated forces: Mission, Church and Kingdom. It seems to me that in most ecclesiological writing, church floats free of either of the other two which is odd. While in much other literature, church is the poor relation to either or both of the others. I have explored some links from Christology and Trinity to explain why such a view will not do, but I now need to give some contours of the relationships with Mission and Kingdom.

You may ask why the triangle shape. Part of the response is that it shows the 3 factors as connected, while demonstrating that none are identical with the others. The shape gives room to explore the dynamics along the three sides and to enquire what might be in the middle of the three. The relationship between Mission and Church is where we started. However, I need to make some comment on the other connections to get a more balanced picture.

Connecting Mission Church & Kingdom



Mission and Church

I have put the label Mission at the top corner, partly in deference to the best of *Missio Dei* thinking. Mission being from God, can be represented as coming from above, and to some extent the other two are derived or even proceed from it. As a matter of history, the mission of God precedes the creating of the people of God, that is, the Church. The Creation is the first chapter of the mission and Adam and Eve are late arrivals. Or, in the denouement of the salvation story, the advent of God the Son as Jesus of Nazareth precedes the community founded by him and derived from him. I agree with *Mission-shaped Church* ‘... the Church is the fruit of God’s Mission— those whom he has redeemed’³⁶

So you can draw the process as a straight line from the mission of the Trinity, focusing in the sending of the Son, which led to the creation of the church. In passing this does help justify the claim that historically speaking, at its origin, mission shaped church. But it is not so simple as thinking the church is just a product of mission, done by something or someone who is not church. No sooner is Church the consequence of mission, than it becomes also the conductor of mission. Taking the fruit analogy, the church becomes also the bearer of the Gospel – it becomes the sower, as well as the fruit. Then the progression has necessarily become more complicated. Perhaps it is like the twin strands of mission and church intertwining in a helix. And in this process, first one, then the other, are perceived as dominant. If first, mission led to church, then church goes on outward in mission which leads to yet further expressions of church. And so the helix continues.

Another pair of words continue to develop the theme of intimate connection. It is not only true that the church is the bearer of the message. This suggests that Gospel is a package which the church carries in its hand, but which is essentially separate from the body that bears it. This view colludes with the picture of evangelist as messenger, and it supports the message of some evangelists; ‘Jesus good, Church bad.’ The worry about that last tag is that so often it is deserved. But if Church is so bad – then what power does Gospel have to change people?

³⁶ Cray (Ed) *Mission-shaped Church* p. 85.

The New Testament also tells us the Church is more than the bearer of the message, it also embodies the message. This is related to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Through the gift of grace and the transformation he brings, we the church experience the first stages of being in Christ, not just Christ being in us. We enter something of the loving life of the Trinity and we get our first glimpses of heaven. The Spirit is a real deposit, not just a promise of some money later. We see Christ in one another and how we treat each other will be taken as how we treat him. This is truly astonishing stuff, but the language of the New Testament for what the Holy Spirit does, encourages it. His fruit actually grows in us. We are that new creation in Christ that 2 Corinthians 5 talks about. Or 'Christ in you the hope of glory, a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit'(Eph 2.22). So, in these ways Mission and Church are bound together and there is a two way relationship going on.

What of Mission and Kingdom?

One way to see this relationship is also about procession. The Mission initiates a process by which the Kingdom comes into being. That looks like putting Mission before Kingdom. The acts of God lead to the rule of God. The signs in the gospels are both missional, in that they embody the good news, as well being indicators of the coming and already kingdom. I am here taking 'mission' in its most basic and apostolic sense – that God is a Sender who sends the Son and the Spirit, for in earlier Eastern thought that is how mission and processions in the Trinity were understood. I am not using it here in its later narrower and derived sense that we, his people, participate in that mission and may conduct particular missions.

However, there is traffic in the other direction. The nature of mission is I think inherently historical. God reveals, acts and sends in space and time. Thus, the word apostolic often is used to refer not just to mission but to key acts and truths in the past. But along this side of the triangle the historical meets the eschatological. This is energy coming from kingdom to mission. Although we struggle to understand this, the 'not yet' Kingdom is advancing into the present from the future. Hence both the Kingdom and the Spirit are foretastes of a future, both of which are real and yet also not fully disclosed. The banquet is prepared and the canapés are being enjoyed. The city of God is laid out with many mansions and the signs to it may be seen.

Once more there is both an initiative from mission and a reciprocal response from Kingdom. Not only that, but the two are bound together. No Kingdom will become present without mission, [though it might be future]. No mission can be authentic unless it leads to advance of the kingdom, and done within its values. Nor can mission be complete until the kingdom is revealed, in all its glory.

2.3 How do Church and Kingdom relate?

Here much ink and no little bile have been spilled in the past. Newbigin, discussing whether Jesus intended to found a Church, makes a pertinent comment, freely admitting the Church is not an end in itself and the Church is not the kingdom of God. 'Jesus manifestly did not intend to leave behind him simply a body of teaching ... What he did was to prepare a community chosen to be the bearer of the secret of the kingdom.'³⁷ In my terms, the kingdom is related to the mission of God and expressive of the rule of God, but it is an idea and itself an analogy, that needs embodying in people. The subsequent mixed history of the Church remains a vexed problem of credibility in linking the Church positively to the kingdom, but that does not inherently undo an intended connection. It now becomes necessary to explore what relationships are posited and assess them. One way is that 'instrument', 'sign' and 'foretaste' are three frequent and related helpful terms in Newbigin's writing.

³⁷ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989), p. 133.

Is Church the Instrument of the Kingdom?

The language of instrument is the least complete in itself. The analogy infers that what is in the hand of the holder is only functionally related to, and more significantly, is inherently different from, that person. If the Church has only a causal connection with the kingdom, then there need not be any inherent overlap between them. Newbigin rejects a wholly instrumental view on two grounds. The first is that the Church is both means and end because it is a foretaste of that which it proclaims. However, such a status is a gift not a virtue. Because of its grafting into Christ and the bestowal of the Spirit, the Church has ‘a real participation in the life of God Himself.’³⁸ Secondly, he argues that the way salvation is proclaimed must be congruent with the nature of salvation. If the message is reconciliation, then this can best be communicated by those reconciled with God. Or put in wider terms; ‘The Church can be instrumental ... because she is much more than instrumental – because she is in fact herself the body of Christ.’³⁹

Is Church a Sign of the Kingdom?

Sign is an accessible term, though inadequate if left to itself. It helps because of its mix of utility and modesty, necessarily pointing beyond itself to that which is fuller and greater. A sign has a role, but it includes those seeing it, going beyond it. This helpfully reinforces that the reality called Church is less than that of the kingdom. So, I am not surprised that the Church is less impressive than the kingdom, though I want it to point in the right direction. The Church will always be an imperfect sign of the kingdom not least because of its fallen members, its imperfect corporate life and less than fully effective mission. Yet signs direct people on their journey. This fits well with the eschatological framework of an inaugurated kingdom; it is advancing but not yet completed. The language of sign also is congruent with the Church’s role of witness. Sign is also language cascading over into Acts and Epistles, where signs and wonders mark the influence of the Spirit on part of the early life of the Church⁴⁰ and offer testimony to apostolic veracity and the presence of the kingdom.⁴¹ As such the kingdom articulates what the Church faces, not what its face currently looks like. ‘Sign’ signals these sorts of perception. The limitation of the image of sign is that it conveys distance between the sign and what is signified. The ecclesiologists of *Eucharistic Presidency* pick up the problem. ‘Thus the Church does more than merely point to a reality other than itself.’⁴² By contrast, Bosch points up the validity of the word but betrays his understanding that seldom goes beyond it.

Jesus’ ministry of erecting signs of God’s incipient reign was emulated by the early church. Christians were not called to do more than erect signs; neither were they called to do less.⁴³

Bosch goes no further. He omits that the early Church were called to be more than signs, because he fails to work with the key word ‘foretaste’.

Is the Church foretaste of the Kingdom?

This term ‘foretaste’ is a distinct contribution offered by Newbigin and it is consistent through his corpus of writing. Without this word ‘foretaste’, the nature of the kingdom Church connection is not just incomplete, but it is robbed of the most intimate and most overlapping connection. Throughout Newbigin’s 1953 book *The Household of God* the foretaste motif is present.⁴⁴ He

³⁸ Newbigin, *The Household of God*, p. 199.

³⁹ Newbigin, *The Household of God*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ As noted by Newbigin in 1952 long before the ministry of John Wimber: *The Household of God*, p. 186.

⁴¹ Acts 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; 15:12; Rom. 15:9; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4. 1 Thess. 1:5 has ‘with power, with the Holy Spirit.’

⁴² House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency*, p. 16, para. 2.12.

⁴³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 49 and also p. 35 in similar terms, drawing on Kasemann.

⁴⁴ Newbigin argues that for the Roman Catholic there is a foretaste through incorporation into the unbroken continuity of the people of God nurtured by the Eucharistic presence of Christ; for the Protestant they are in Christ already by faith, and for the Pentecostal the presence of the Spirit is celebrated in many ways.

concludes the book with two chapters; one on the eschatological nature of the Church, all of which underline the foretaste theme. In the final chapter, which is missiological, he ties together the instrumental view and the sign view within the deeper reality which is foretaste, arguing that without it the other two become empty. Newbigin also relates sign and foretaste in another way. He connects sign with the witness of the Church and foretaste with its life.⁴⁵ It follows that unless the foretaste is real and demonstrable then the witness will be hollow.

This provides connection to his more famous and later 1989 statement ‘I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.’⁴⁶ Yet throughout, the partial nature, inherent in foretaste, is clear. Earlier in the book he makes the categorical connection. ‘The presence of the kingdom in the Church is the presence of its foretaste, its firstfruit, its pledge (*arrabōn*) in the Spirit.’ Yet it is a presence ‘veiled in weakness’ and a matter of reality and pledge, ‘of having and of hoping’.⁴⁷ It is the gift of first-fruits but not more. It is genuine but it is partial.

Genuine overlap is key. The partial occurs now, and ‘foretaste’ expresses the already dimension of the ‘now and not yet’ kingdom. This has the virtue of being the most deeply eschatological way of expressing the kingdom/ Church relationship. Moreover, while the other ways of describing the relationship between kingdom and Church all indicate proximity and some sort of connection, only the language of ‘foretaste’ enshrines an overlap not just a link.

‘Foretaste’ accepts a degree of partial embodiment of the kingdom in the Church, which other words are shy of. In the report *Eucharistic Presidency*, the authors write of the Church ‘By virtue of its participation in the life of God, it is not only a sign and instrument, but also a genuine foretaste of God’s kingdom ...’⁴⁸ This fits with Dulles’ observation, notably in his chapter on the Church as servant, that other scholars ‘cannot find anywhere in the New Testament the idea that there are people called to the Kingdom without also being called to the Church.’⁴⁹

Each of those three successive images has a higher, and more human-like, role for the Church to play, by the Spirit, in the scheme of God’s mission. It simply is part of the picture that we are not free to dispense with. The Church is not just the bearer of the gospel, or a pointer to it, but a way in which it is embodied. Hence, we have the daring image in the New Testament that the Church is the Body of Christ.

2.4 Linking Mission, Kingdom and Church to the Trinity

Now here comes the curved ball. I note this triangulation and its patterns are rather like those of the Trinity. Do not hear me say I am introducing modalism. I am not saying each member of Trinity is only concerned with one point of the triangle; that this is their job description. I am aware that all three persons in the Godhead are involved in all three outcomes. However, notice that there is a set of perichoretic relationships between the three: Mission, Church and Kingdom. What happens in any one affects the other two. Did you notice that I provocatively used the term ‘procession’ about what comes from Mission to the other two? I suggested that historically speaking there is some priority held by mission. Let me now link this to what I have been learning from Tom Smail and his book *Like Father Like Son*.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *The Household of God*, p. 196.

⁴⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, p. 227.

⁴⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel* pp. 119-120.

⁴⁸ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency*, p. 16, para. 2.12

⁴⁹ Dulles, *Models of The Church*, p. 101, citing G.G.C. O’Collins, *Notes and comments: On R.P. McBrien’s Do we need the Church?* (Heythrop Journal 10, 1969), pp. 416-419.

⁵⁰ T. Smail, *Like Father Like Son: The Trinity imaged in our humanity* (Paternoster, 2005)

Smail characterizes the nature of God the Father, as the image of father itself suggests, as 'Initiating creativity' and thus the Son and Spirit in some sense proceed from the Father. The same dynamics are of course true of mission hence I place both at the top of the triangle.

Smail uses the term 'obedient responsiveness' as characteristic of the Incarnate Son. John's gospel most notably traces this feature. The Son is also the visible focus of the mission of the Trinity, just as very often the Church at its best is. Mission happens as the Son is obedient and that is true of the Church too. Furthermore it is the Church, not the Mission or the Kingdom which is called the Body of Christ. Hence I link the two. This Jesus also promises the Spirit.

The term Smail uses for the Spirit is 'creative completing'. The Spirit does not initiate, but completes. The Spirit completes the mission of the Father, the glory of the Son and the bringing in of the Kingdom. All the foretaste language is connected through the presence of the Spirit and the coming of the Kingdom. The two are joined at the hip. In addition, both are seen as inherently dynamic and powerful. Yet with both, neither are seen in themselves but only signs that go well beyond talk. The effects of wind and the in-breaking kingdom are both detectable and mysterious.

What is at the centre of Mission, Church and Kingdom?

Here the precise parallel between the three and the Trinity breaks down, for I think the centre is Jesus. Consider the Gospels. I suggest to you that the Kingdom is not central to the Gospels. It is rather the key message of the central figure. In that sense, Jesus is greater than the kingdom. Without the king, there is little worthwhile kingdom left.

Jesus is also the epicenter of God's mission. In him God is supremely revealed; in him Salvation is accomplished once for all. In him, we are being not only transformed which is encouraging, but we are 'partakers in the divine nature' as 2 Peter 1:4 tells us which is astonishing. *Theosis*, as Athanasius explains, means 'God became man so that men might become gods.'⁵¹ I merely add that Jesus is both founder and head of the Church. He is central and Rowan Williams is keen and right to keep telling us that the Church is event. It is what forms through transformative encounter with Jesus. Spiritually and theologically the Church is formed Christologically.

2.5 Value the Church alongside Mission and Kingdom

I therefore suggest that the doctrine of the Church once more deserves rehabilitating, but in dynamic triangulated relationship with mission and kingdom. The 20th century has witnessed a history of unhelpful oscillation between the priority of Church or mission, or of the Church and the kingdom. Bosch in *Transforming Mission*, shows a rejection, during a succession of world missionary conferences, of what he calls the church-centred mission of Tambaram in 1938, in favour of mission-centred Church in 1952 at Willingen.⁵² The church-centred view was also rightly criticised later for exalting the task of creating churches at the expense of a focus on seeing the Kingdom advance. The danger, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was the distinction between Church and world being entirely dropped.⁵³

⁵¹ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 269:54.

⁵² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 369-389.

⁵³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 383.

This was an odd reversal of a Christendom problem. Dan Beeby writes of ‘the curse of Christendom’ that ‘therefore there was no need for a mission.’⁵⁴ Clapp concurs in what he calls the most pertinent fact that in Christendom the realities of Church and world are fused. Thus, there is ‘no longer anything to call the world.’ In Christendom, the Church swallowed the world. In reverse of this, but with a similar result, the World Council of Churches of the 1960’s so ‘let the world set the agenda’ that it made the world all encompassing and the Church was eclipsed, and missionary initiative was despised and discouraged.

However, Bosch explains that since the 1980s the Church has been ‘rehabilitated in WCC circles as an instrument of mission.’ Yet note the choice of the term ‘instrument’. He spots there has been affirmation of ‘the centrality of the church in God’s divine economy’ but with recognition of its deeply ambiguous life as a ‘union of the divine and the dusty.’⁵⁵ Bosch himself still holds the relationship as being the priority of mission. ‘There is a church because there is a mission.’⁵⁶ I now think this is a false antithesis.⁵⁷

By contrast Michael Goheen writing on Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology has a high view of role of the Church. ‘Ecclesiology has become the central organizing principle of 20th century theology.’ The changing mission context in the west has led ... ‘to a whole reevaluation of the nature of the church and its role in God’s redemptive program.’⁵⁸

3 Other reasons to retain the term ‘Church’ – not least for fxC.

It has always seemed odd to me that people talk of mission in a way that seems blind to the obvious fact that there are *people* doing that mission. Disincarnate mission is neither possible nor Christian. And these people are part of the Church. They might well sometimes be Church in sodality, but that is a different matter.⁵⁹ So there is a definitional problem in language that talks of mission but which refuses connection to Church.

This language is dangerous because it perpetuates the 18th century divorce in Protestant thought, between Church and Mission. In that period to do anything at all, that route to separate societies perhaps had to be taken, but it has left a sad legacy whereby most churches are non-missional and most missions fail to have an ecclesial identity. I wonder if you know this strongly worded quote from Lesslie Newbigin: ‘An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church’.⁶⁰ I think there is real danger that we castigate the latter problem but are blind to the real offence of the former issue. The option of a churchless mission is nonsense. That comment applies equally to rejection of the term fresh expressions of Church.

⁵⁴ D. Beeby, *Canon and Mission* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1999) p. 3.

⁵⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission* pp. 388-389

⁵⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission* p. 390.

⁵⁷ So Newbigin wrote later in life in 1986. ‘without the church there is no authentic mission.’ G. Wainwright, *Signs amid the Rubble* (Unpublished works of Lesslie Newbigin) (Eerdmans, 2003) p. 104

⁵⁸ M. Goheen *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* : Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology, in *International Review of Mission* 91, 362 (2002) p. 345

⁵⁹ See Ralph Winter, *The two structures of God’s redemptive mission*. Downloadable from the Internet.

⁶⁰ L. Newbigin, *The Household of God* (originally SCM, 1953: now Paternoster, 1998), p. 201.

There is also another tactical reason for resisting mission without church language. If we were to call the fresh expressions only fresh expressions of mission, the rest of the church is capable of assuming it is nothing to do with them and they can ignore it. However, precisely because they are fresh expressions of *Church*, there is a subversive, yet healthy, dual claim going on. One is that it is normal that Church is missional and the other is that Church can be expressed differently from what was inherited. Only the language of ‘fresh expressions of Church’ has this beckoning to serious re-imagination. It is inherent in the language; saying ‘what you are seeing is Church and it is being freshly expressed.’ The sole use of the language of mission entirely misses this and would be a big mistake. Even the language of church planting will not do, for it is too easily assumed that we know what Church is and merely clone and franchise it.

For Anglicans, I add one argument from tradition and our own 16th century founding story. One Cranmerian precept was that ‘the abuse does not take away the use.’ Hence having a flawed Church may make mission more difficult and it certainly does invite repentance. However, it does not mean that we must abandon what is a strong biblical and theological two-way connection between mission and church. I suggest they are as inseparable as chicken and egg. Remove either and problems will ensue.

So why insist that the term ‘fresh expressions of Church’ is useful, apt, necessary and valid? It fits with biblical usage, it is consistent with Trinitarian and Christological thought, it preserves the triangular relations with mission and kingdom and it is needed to prod a reluctant wider church into realising that being faithful and reimagining can be combined.

I end with citations from varied authors:

‘There is no way of belonging to Christ that does not include the Church.’⁶¹ Graham Cray

Andrew Kirk in *What Is Mission?* ‘Throughout this study we have assumed that, in one way or another, the Church is at the heart of God’s mission.’⁶²

Going beyond the well known quote from Lesslie Newbigin: ... ‘the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.’ I add this

‘The church is to be the primary agent of mission and if it does not exhibit evident community and transformed lives then any amount of evangelistic events and church projects will have limited credibility ... That community is described in Scripture as nothing less than the body of Christ. ... this means that how the church conducts its life is foundational to the whole work of proclaiming the good news of Christ.’⁶³

‘Ultimately the evidence for the credibility of the Gospel in the eyes of the world must be a quality of life manifested in the Church which the world cannot find elsewhere.’ It is a comment from over 60 years ago; *Towards the Conversion of England*.⁶⁴

One year I put it like this ...

A church without evangelism has lost its heart.

Evangelism without the Church has lost its body.

Medical wisdom recommends the retention of the relationship.⁶⁵

⁶¹ G. Cray, *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Church*, (Grove Evangelism 57) p.5.

⁶² A. Kirk, *What Is Mission?*, p. 205.

⁶³ The quote sounds like Newbigin, but both I and Paul Weston have been unable to source it.

⁶⁴ Bishop of Rochester (Ed.) *Towards the Conversion of England* (Church Assembly, 1945) p. 33.

⁶⁵ G Lings, Lectures to students at Church Army’s Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism.

What then should we do?

I limit myself to one suggestion.

In our congregations, and our theological colleges, and the wider church, let us change one priority. Up till now there has been heavy investment in acquiring Sunday skills - making quality worship possible. There has been heavy investment too in enabling the church to recover confidence in mission.

Let us give as much space, resource and importance to fostering the quality of community life that smells of Jesus, that commends itself as embodying his values, that is inexplicable other than being the overflow of his life within us. Let's go deep with community, absorbing the writings of Vanier and Peck. Learn from Alan Kreider and the early Church and from the best of New Monasticism today and the shorter writings of Claire Dalpra. Re-read the New Testament as a treatise on Christian community and the love modeled there by the Trinity.

Grow Jesus-centred community and it will have a missional effect. Be Jesus-like together and the kingdom will advance. Always hold Mission, Kingdom and Church in perichoretic relationships. Recover a high view of the Church as long as your view of Christ is higher still.

Other implications for theory and practice

If the triangulated relationship between Mission, Kingdom and Church is broadly right then certain other things follow; as with understandings of the Trinity.

- It is neither helpful nor ultimately possible to collapse the three into one. All belong to, are needed by, are related to, and are different from, the other.
- While it is possible to privilege both the Father and Mission, in terms of procession, it should not be done to as to subordinate the other two such that they are less than essential to the overall purposes of God.
- You cannot remove any one of the three without damaging the other two.
- To examine one without relation to the other two will be to invite distortion. Part of the identity of each one is known through its relationships to the other two.