Towards an Evangelical Ecclesiology (Part One)

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper[1] is to explore a view of the church which is consonant with God's Word and applicable to God's world against the backdrop of the present situation in the Church of England. Accordingly, the paper divides into two parts.

The first part is a presentation of an evangelical understanding of the nature and purpose of the church, drawing together some of the main teachings of Scripture on the matter, together with a number of reflections on ecclesiology by the Reformers. This provides the theological undergirding for the second part which considers the implications that such an ecclesiology has for the related issues of episcopacy, ecumenism, ministry and mission.

The paper is an exploratory treatment of this important subject. It attempts to put in place a number of 'markers' to indicate the way ahead for a thoroughly evangelical ecclesiology.

Evangelicals and ecclesiology

In his address at *N.E.A.C.* 3 in 1988, the Archbishop of Canterbury extended a challenge to Anglican evangelicals to do some serious thinking about ecclesiology and said:

> If the current evangelical renewal in the Church of England is to have a lasting impact then there must be more explicit attention given to the doctrine of the church.

Twenty years earlier in 1968, Professor Klaas Runia commented that

> There is an erroneous doctrine of the church, which is so often found among evangelicals. Many of them tend to regard the visible organised Church as relatively unimportant, primarily because in it one finds many who have little faith, if any at all.

He then goes on to urge evangelicals to

> give special attention to the biblical doctrine of the church . . . If ever we want to solve the present problems of the church, we must first know what the church really is according to Scripture.[2]

In all honesty we have to admit that generally speaking there is some

substance in what is implied by these two statements, namely, that there is a certain weakness in the way in which many evangelicals think about the church. If an evangelical were to be asked to say what he believed about the death of Christ or the inspiration of Holy Scripture, then in most cases he would be able to do so with relative ease. But if that same evangelical were to be asked to relate the essentials of his beliefs about the church, that might prove to be a little more difficult. As a result of this lack of clarity in thinking about the church, evangelicals become all the more prone to accept views about the church which are far from Scriptural, and certainly in the Church of England that means quasi—Catholic views of the church—this happening almost by default.

However, from another standpoint, evangelicals have been giving a great deal of time to thinking about the church in the last twenty years from a more practical point of view. Much of the discussion concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the sixties and seventies was often ecclesiological, concerning every-member-ministry for instance. Who is more concerned with evangelism and church growth than the evangelical? That is why it is not that wide of the mark to say that an evangelical's view of the Church of England is captured by the saying that it is 'the best boat to fish from'—this encapsulates, perhaps in a crude form admittedly, a deep scriptural truth. When evangelicals are patronizingly dismissed by some as having no ecclesiology, what they often mean is that they do not like the ecclesiology that they have. As we shall see in a moment, evangelicals do have the richest, most authentic ecclesiology there is, because it is rooted in, and arises from, Scripture.

Getting the right approach

When we come to the question of ecclesiology there is always the temptation to approach it, as it were, 'head-on', as a subject in isolation from the other matters of belief; as if it existed in a theological vacuum. In some ways there is a similarity between the way the doctrine of the church is approached and the doctrine of God. To try and consider God in isolation always leads to an abstraction—like the God of the philosophers. But the God of the Bible is always God-in-relation[3]. We see this within God's own being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but also God in relation to his creation, so he is the God-who-creates, the God-who-saves, the God-who-speaks, and so on. So the church too is always a church-in-relation. In fact the identity, significance and nature of the church are in part derived from its relation in two directions, namely its relation to God and its relation to the world.

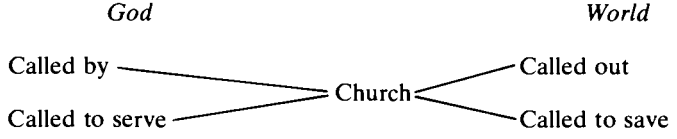
First of all what the church is can only be grasped when we look at it from the standpoint of who God is. Edmund Clowney eloquently puts it like this:

> The church cannot be understood apart from the person , presence and work of the triune God. The church is the congregation, in heaven and on earth, of those whom God has united to Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit and in the fellowship of the Spirit. A God-centred definition of the church must recognise God's choosing in Christ before the world began, as well as of his 'begetting us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead' (I Peter 1:3b) and his making us alive who were children of wrath, dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1–10).[4]

On the other hand, our understanding of the church will be lopsided if it is not also viewed in relation to the world; this is seen most clearly in our Lord's High Priestly Prayer in John 17:16–18:

> They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

The relationship between the church, God and the world can be represented as follows:



Called *by* God—predestined and chosen by him from all eternity according to his will, redeemed by the blood of Christ, united to him by the Holy Spirit on hearing and believing the Gospel (Eph. 1:4–14).

Called *to* serve God, as his people to obey him and glorify him, so that the church comes from God and is to be presented to God 'without spot or wrinkle or any such blemish' (Eph. 5:27).

The corollary of this is to be seen in the relation of the church to the world:

Called *out* of the world—that is out of man-in-community in rebellion against God, to be distinctive (holy) in attitudes, values and behaviour, submitting to Christ's lordship.

Called *to* save the world, and so, serve God in being the herald of the Gospel, the means of salvation, as well as being salt and light in bringing about reform in accordance with God's will. Peter in his first letter (1 Peter 2:9) captures this dual orientation of the church in the following words:

> 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God [Godward aspect]—*so that* you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light [worldward aspect].

A statement made within the context of the saving death of Christ.

The Church and the Kingdom of God

It is at this point that we need briefly to consider the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God, for in some evangelical circles such is the hazy thinking about what the kingdom is, that there is a danger of following in the paths of the old social gospel movement of the nineteenth century.[5]. Putting it very simply, the New Testament evidence would suggest that the Kingdom of God is the dynamic reign or rule of God whereby he brings about his saving and judging activity in Jesus Christ. And so it is a Kingdom which has to be 'entered into', indeed one has to be 'born from above' even to see this Kingdom. (John 3:3) It is a rule which was inaugurated with the first coming of Christ, extended through the preaching of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ and will be consummated only with the return of Christ. This means that while the Kingdom of God cannot simply be equated with the visible church (the error of Mediaeval Catholicism), it is within and through the church that God's rule in Christ should be best expressed. On this matter Professor. I.H. Marshall has written:

> The kingdom of God is not just the sovereign activity of God: it is also the set-up created by the activity of God, and that set-up consists of people. Hence the people created by Jesus is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God: ideally they are the people who accept the rule of God through Jesus and on whom he bestows the blessings of his rule. The church as the people of God is the object of his rule and is therefore his kingdom, or at least an expression of it, imperfect and sinful though it is.[6]

The Nature of the Church

Against this background we are now in a position to see what the Scripture has to teach us about the nature of the church. According to Paul Minear,[7] the Bible uses over eighty figures and symbols to depict the church's nature, but we shall just focus upon four which are brimful of theological significance: the church as the people of God, the church as the community of the Messiah, the church as the Body of Christ, and the church as the fellowship of the Spirit.[8]

A. The Church as the people of God.

As we have already seen, Peter takes the Old Testament term 'People of God' and applies it to the New Testament church (I Peter 2:9) and so as with many ideas and themes in the Old Testament this finds its fulfilment in Christ and the age of the New Covenant. The actual word for church *ekklēsia*, which is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *qāhāl* basically means 'assembly' or 'gathering'. It is a term which describes the covenant-making assembly at Sinai (Dt. 9:10) as

well as Israel gathered before God for covenant renewal (Dt. 29:1). In the New Testament this term is taken and almost exclusively applied to young Christian communities after Pentecost, in contrast with the term 'synagogue' used to refer to the Jews—the two exceptions being Acts 7:38, where Luke uses the term *ekklēsia* to describe Israel in the wilderness, and James 2:2 where he uses the term 'synagogue' to refer to the Christian congregation. So in what sense was the term *ekklēsia* used in the New Testament to depict the people of the New Covenant?

First, there were the churches that met in houses (Romans 16:5)—which, secondly, were part of the church in a locality—the local church—for example in Rome. Thirdly, there is the coming together of the housechurches weekly or in a more frequent assembly which is also called the church, as in I Corinthians 11 and 14. Fourthly the church is thought of as being one organism as we read in Acts 9:31: 'the church *throughout* Judea, Galilee and Samaria', and of course this universal nature of the church as the people of God finds its clearest expression in Col. 1:18 and Eph. 4:4ff. So, there is the small unit-house gathering, the larger gathering together in a locality, and the church universal. But the point to note is this: *the 'church' is always a people, never a building or an organization.*

B. The Church as the Community of the Messiah.

All that is promised in the Old Testament and foreshadowed there, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who as the anointed one and true King, is the heir of David. Just as the Lord Jehovah called the Twelve Tribes together to be his people, the Lord Jesus calls together twelve apostles. Those who accept Christ, and accept the apostolic message, also accept him and the one who sent him and enter into his Kingdom (Mt. 10; 32; 40 *passim*). It is Christ who builds his church upon the apostolic rock (Mt. 16:18); whose word is the law of the church (Mt. 28.20), who gives his Spirit of life to the church (Rom. 8:9). There is no doubt that the Church which is God-centred is also to be Christ-centred. As the gathered people of God, the church is gathered around the Messiah.

C. The Church as the Body of Christ.

It is because of its union with Christ that the church can be described as his 'body'. It is into the body on the cross that the church is united and therefore redeemed (Eph. 2:16), symbolized by the one loaf at the Lord's supper (I Cor.10:16). The Church is united to Christ in an organic way—Jn.14:16; I Cor.12:13. The body of Christ picture is also used by Paul to describe the diversity in unity of the church, both local and universal—and of course there is only one head of the church and that is Christ himself—Col.1:18.

D. The Fellowship of the Spirit.

As is patently evident by now, the church is no mere earthly society: it is divine in origin and divinely sustained by the Spirit. The

Spirit completes the revelation of Scripture and illumines the church (Jn. 16:12ff.); leads the church in mission (Acts 5:32); gives it life and liberty (Gal. 4) as well as binding it together in love producing fruit (Gal. 5:22). It is the Spirit who also bestows gifts upon the church for its upbuilding to the praise of God and the furtherance of the Gospel (Eph. 4:9ff.). Donald Allister expresses this pneumatic dimension well when he says:

> True evangelicalism sees its deepest biblical roots in Pentecost; not in the shallow contemporary fixation on immediate experience of the Spirit, but the utterly comprehensive truth that the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Christ has returned to his church in the person of His Spirit. This perception both undermines the weakness of incarnational and other partly developed ecclesiologies, and also contains and unites the great truths to which they bear witness. In our true reformed and evangelical ecclesiology the Holy Spirit applies the whole work of Christ to his Church. He alone is the vicar of Christ on earth.[9]

Metaphors—Use and Abuse

Care must be taken when we come to the various metaphors which the Bible uses to describe the nature of the church, for there is both a correct and incorrect way of understanding and using them. The reason why so many different pictures are taken by the biblical writers to describe the church is because the church, like love, is a many splendoured thing—no one picture or symbol will do. The different metaphors are employed to bring out different truths about the church. Therefore bearing in mind much of the Old Testament's background to many of the pictures, we have the church as a temple (I Cor. 3:16), indicating the dwelling place of God, a place where sacrifice of praise, prayer and devotion are offered to him; the church as a gathering (I Cor. 14), where the law is read and preached. Ultimately we have the picture of the church as a city (Rev. 21:1–4), the new Jerusalem, the people of God in community, submitting to the ruling of their King who dwells in the midst of them. Also there is the marvellous picture of the church as the bride (Rev. 21:9), indicating covenant, fidelity and love; different pictures focusing upon different features of the church's nature and function.

But it is possible to go astray, in two ways. The first is to be so taken by one picture that it becomes the dominant model in determining our thinking about the church to such an extent that we neglect other pictures. This has happened in recent years in both the Roman Catholic Church and in Charismatic churches which have almost exclusively focused on the church as the 'body of Christ', with different results. The other way in which we can go wrong is to take one picture and then apply it in a way in which it was never intended. For example, the writer Anders Nygren[10] uses the 'body of Christ'

figure to suggest that just as a body without a head is dead, so a head with a body can do nothing. The implication of this—that Christ is helpless without the church—would surely never have crossed the apostle Paul's mind. So preachers especially, beware—stick to the text and context; use the models as the Bible uses them, no more and no less.

Aspects of the Church

We now move on to applying the biblical teaching and look at the aspects of the church. On the basis of the biblical emphasis upon the *spiritual* nature of the church, the Reformers saw quite clearly that the church had two aspects—what we can call the invisible church and the visible church, or the church eternal and the church temporal—how it appears to God and how it appears to us. In saying this the Reformers were not claiming that there are two churches, one real, the other apparent, but rather that there are two aspects of the one reality which is the church. Thus the members of the invisible church (invisible to us—that is why we say we *believe* in one holy, catholic and apostolic church), are also members of the visible church, but exactly who they are is only known to God. Ultimately it is only the elect which constitute the church of Christ, on earth and in heaven; and one day, when Christ returns, the invisible will become visible. In other words it is made up of all those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27). But let us not think that the Reformers, in reaction to Rome who equated the visible mediaeval church with the true church, took flight in the invisible church, because they did not. Calvin in particular placed great store in the visible aspect of the church. He saw the church as being an earthly community where God's Word was preached and the sacraments administered:

> Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.[11]

The same thought is expressed in our article 19 of the Thirty-nine Articles. The visible churches are only provisional; they will always be in error. So to state as the Archbishop of Canterbury did at N.E.A.C. 3 that 'If it is the Body of Christ, the Church too demands our belief, trust and faith', not only betrays an abuse of the metaphor 'the body', but also a failure to recognize this vital distinction between the visible and invisible church. What is more he was extolling an essentially Roman Catholic view of the church as found in the Pope's *Mystici Corporis Christi*.

Attributes of the Church

The Nicene Creed confesses 'One holy, catholic and apostolic church'—the four essential attributes of the church.

First, the Church of Christ is *one*. This as we have already seen is essentially a spiritual unity, as indicated in the oft misquoted prayer of our Lord in John 17:21—a favourite of the ecumenists, 'May they all be one; as thou, father, art in me and I in thee, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that thou didst send me' (New English Bible). This does not describe an external organization—a church as some multinational ecclesiastical company—but a church of a deeply personal and spiritual nature, as is the mystery of the blessed trinity itself. The fact is, all true believers *are* one (we are back to the invisible church again) and so are to express that oneness in action.

Secondly, we believe the church to be *holy*, set apart from the world for God, something increasingly being brought into question not by our so-called disunity, but by the flagrant disregard of plain biblical teaching on morality. How can the holiness of the church be taken seriously when we have bishops and reports extolling homosexuality as a perfectly valid lifestyle?[12] We are to be in the world, but not of it; and this is something we desperately need to recapture if we are going to cut ice in our society today—holiness without which no man shall see God.

Thirdly, we are *catholic*, which means universal and non-sectarian. If ever there has been a term which has been abused, it is this. For all the Church of England's claims to be catholic, it is really sectarian in practice, for example in not recognizing the orders of a non-episcopally ordained man whose rule is the Word of God. We must recapture its true meaning, namely the universality of the church; indeed the first time the term was used in Christian literature by Ignatius of Antioch, it referred to the heavenly church (Smyrna 8). What is the true test of catholicity? It is that which the early church had—submission to the Word of God, the teaching of Christ and the apostles.

And so we come to the fourth attribute of the church, that it is *apostolic*. Again we must stress the negative that this has nothing to do with so-called apostolic succession by the laying on of hands. This is an idea that was largely introduced into the Church of England in the last century by the Tractarians, and has nothing to do with historic Anglicanism. We understand apostolicity in two senses. That the church is one which is *sent* into the world with the Gospel (*apostello*—send out) that is, it is a missionary church. But also, the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles, it is in the succession of the apostles' *teaching* that the church is truly apostolic. (2 Tim. 2:2). Such a view was common to both the English and Continental Reformers as is summarized by Paul Avis in his excellent treatment of the subject:

> By making the gospel alone the power at work in the Church through the Holy Spirit, the Reformers did away with the necessity of a doctrine of apostolic succession, replacing it with the notion of a

> succession of truth. Correspondingly, the gospel of truth was held to be sufficient to serve the catholicity of the Church.[13]

It is possible, as history sadly testifies, to have an unbroken line in bishops and for that church not to be apostolic but apostate if it perverts the apostles' teaching. P.T. Forsyth puts forward the evangelical and reformed position when he says:

> The true catholicity and the true succession are the evangelical—the catholicity and continuity of the Gospel, in its creative, self-organising, and self-recuperative power

He then goes on to write:

> The great external link between these [New Testament churches] was the moral influence and authority of the Apostolate; and the Apostle was not a monarchical bishop, nor indeed an official at all as official would be understood in a great institution today. And the Apostolate died out as the Apostles died, and as the Episcopate arose. The Episcopate replaced the Apostolate rather than prolonged it, taking some of its functions but not entitled to its prerogative . . . Much writing on this subject suffers from a defect in method which already antiquates it—from what may be called the Oxford ban, from the tradition of the elders, from patristicism. It reads the New Testament through the coloured spectacles and horn rims of the Fathers. And its notion of the Apostolate seems accordingly to sit very tight to the institutions that held the Fathers, and very loose to the Gospel that made the Apostles. The mainstay of the Church, when State, Episcopate, and such ecclesiastical ideas fail it, is the Apostolate, whose one charter is the Gospel, and whose one suit is the evangelical succession, whatever may have happened to the canonical. Out of village Bethels God is always, by the word of His Gospel, raising up the children of Abraham and successors to Peter and Paul, though bishops be ignorant of them and priests acknowledge them not.[14]

The Marks of the Church

We have already touched upon this when we looked at the question of the visible church. The church has certain distinguishing features, just as a living body has certain features which indicate that it is alive—like respiration, movement, brain activity and so on. We refer to Article 19:

> The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

Three marks are to be found here: The preaching of the Word of God

in pure form, that is unadulterated by human speculation, whether by tradition or, as is more the case today, by liberal theology. Then there is the due administration of sacraments ('due' = 'proper') in which the ministry of the visible word is to be linked to the audible word. This would seem to rule out any *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments which works regardless of belief on the part of the recipient. Also it has been suggested by some that contained within this is discipline as a mark of the church, for here we have a congregation of *faithful* men. Here there is no question of judging who and who is not finally saved—only God can do that—but there is the call to discern whether a person professes faith, a faith which is credible, one which shows itself in day-to-day living. This, sadly, is not exactly the mark of the church which is to the fore today. We now find ourselves in the extraordinary situation where a Bishop can deny the virginal conception and bodily resurrection of our Lord with impunity, but let an ordinand take a stand on not wearing a stole for ordination and he will soon have to give an account to someone in authority.

Even if we were to agree with the later Calvin (his definitive *Institutes* of 1559) that discipline does not constitute one of the marks of the church, it is surely nonetheless vital for the church's spiritual health and well-being.

The Purpose of the Church

According to the apostle Peter the people of God are to 'declare the wonderful praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light' (I Peter 2:9). It follows that the church, local and universal, has three primary rôles which we can describe as *cultic*, *caring* and *crusading*.

A. The church is a cultic church.

In Acts 2:42 we read that the believers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer'. For this to be enhanced the church is ordered, so we have the offices of presbyters/overseers and deacons. The meetings of the church are also to reflect order, for our God is not a God of confusion and all must be done with decency and order (I Cor. 14:40). As the people of God meet, the primary movement is from God to man—God speaking through his Word (the word preached and the word seen) and applied to the heart by the Spirit. Then there is the movement from man to God, offering praise and prayers of intercession. But there is also the movement from man to man in encouraging one another, forgiving and reconciling. That is the New Testament triadic pattern.[15]

B. A caring church.

This is to be expressed in terms of fellowship—*koinōnia*—in acts of mercy to one another, giving to those in need, as we see with the

churches of Macedonia in 2 Cor. 8. That care must also be shown to the unbelieving world, as in giving to the poor as our Lord commands in Matthew 6.

C. A crusading church.

This is the church militant bringing down Satan's strongholds primarily by the proclamation of the Gospel (2 Cor. 10:3ff.). This, after all, was Paul's priestly duty (Rom. 15:16). It was the hallmark of the early church as an apostolic church, sent out to 'make disciples of all nations'. This was *the* priority to which all else, even things good and proper in themselves, had to be subsumed. We see this in Acts 6 and the question of caring for widows—a good thing to do, of course, but in order that the priority of proclaiming the Gospel could be maintained, others were given this task. We also see this concern undergirding the pastoral epistles. What is the chief concern of 1 and 2 Timothy? Is it really church order? Not at all: it is the concern that the apostolic truth be maintained, that the gospel should not be brought into disrepute, so that our Saviour is pleased who 'wants all men to be saved and to come to know the truth' (1 Tim. 2:3). The church is to hold up and hold forth the truth of the Lord (1 Tim. 3:15). A church which is not a crusading church is really no church at all, not in New Testament terms, but a pale reflection of what it ought to be.

Summary

We believe in the church, local and universal, holy and apostolic, temporal and eternal, marked by preaching the Word of God, attested to by the two sacraments, corrected and ruled by that Word in all it does; so that it might be a light to the world, a means of grace as it reaches out to needy men and women with the Gospel, and by its life and teaching express the glorious kingdom of God. Could we want a more amazing, lofty view of the church than this?

In Part Two we shall turn to working through some of the implications that this teaching has in four areas of the church's life—episcopacy, ecumenism, ministry and mission. (To be continued).

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NOTES

1 The substance of a paper given at the Church Society Conference of the Church of Ireland, Lisburn, 1990.
2 Klaas Runia, *Reformation Today*, (Banner of Truth, 1968) pp. 44f.
3 See D.M. Mackay, 'Language, Meaning and God', *The Open Mind* (Ed. M. Tinker, Inter-Varsity Press 1988) pp. 165–183.
4 E. Clowney, 'Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church', in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, (Ed. D.A. Carson, Paternoster, 1984) p. 98.
5 For a more detailed presentation of this view see M. Tinker, 'Context, Content and Culture, Proclaiming the Gospel Today', in *Restoring the Vision*, (Ed. M. Tinker, Monarch, 1990) pp. 61–65.

6 I.H. Marshall, 'The Hope of the New Age. The Kingdom of God in the New Testament', *Themelios*, Vol. 11, No. 1. 1985, p. 12.
7 Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia, 1960).
8 See E. Clowney's article 'Church', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Edd. Ferguson and Wright, Inter-Varsity Press, 1988) p. 140.
9 Donald Allister, 'Ecclesiology: A Reformed Understanding of the Church', *Churchman*, Vol. 103, 1989, pp. 252–261.
10 Anders Nygren, *Christ and His Church*, (Philadelphia, 1956) pp. 89–100.
11 *Institutes*, IV.1.9.
12 E.g. *Homosexual Relationships—a contribution to discussion* (Church Information Office, London, 1979).
13 Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, (M.M.S., 1970) p. 128.
14 P.T. Forsyth, *The Church and The Sacraments*, (Independent Press Limited, 197).
15 See I.H. Marshall's article 'How far did the early Christians *worship* God?', *Churchman* Vol. 99, 1985, pp. 216–229, for a full presentation of this view.