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# Models of the Church

## Kevin Giles

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A husband once received a card from his wife on his birthday which said, 'Happy birthday darling, you are a model husband.' He was a bit uncertain as to what this meant, so he looked up the word 'model' in his dictionary. He was somewhat stunned to read, 'A model is a small replica of the real thing.' But there are other meanings of this word. For example, in the physical and social sciences a 'model' is a conceptual way of representing some aspect of

reality. We have all seen one of those formations of coloured balls which we are told is a model of the atomic structure of some compound or element.

In the social sciences models, or 'typologies' as they are more commonly called, are frequently used to distinguish differing social structures or groupings. The pioneer sociologist, Max Weber, initiated this approach by arguing that leaders (or to be more precise, those who exercise authority) may be legitimated in one of three ways: by rational, traditional or charismatic recognition. These alternatives Weber called 'ideal types' for each was a conceptual abstraction. Individuals may be recognised as leaders simply because they have been appointed to an office, or because in their society age (for example) conferred authority, or because of personal charisma — but usually more than one of these things is influential. In each particular case one needs to ask which means of legitimation are present, and which one is of most importance.

In theology the use of typologies

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was introduced by H.R. Niebuhr in his classic study, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, New York, 1951). He delineated five typical ways Christians have related to the society in which they find themselves. The application of such models or typologies to ecclesiology was given explicit formulation in Avery Dulles' important book *Models of the Church* which first appeared in 1974 (2nd edition, 1988). Rather than attempting to give one doctrine of the church, Dulles outlines five alternative ways in which the church has been theologically understood: as a divine institution established directly by Christ; the mystical body of Christ; a sacrament; a herald of the good news, and as a servant in the world.

I will use some of these terms but I wish to take a different approach. I intend to set out a number of models of the church as they can be seen to a greater or lesser degree in the congregational life of local churches. These types are entirely descriptive in nature.

Dulles was not, however, the first to construct models of the church. The first steps in this direction were taken by Jesus who used a wide range of metaphors or pictures to speak of the Christian community (salt, light, vine, flock, etc. – see P. Minear, *Images of the Church*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1960). The apostle Paul developed yet other images or models, the most profound being the body of Christ. He used this metaphor to explain what it meant to be the Christian community, and to correct erroneous views. It had a descriptive and prescriptive rationale. In writing to the Corinthians, he argues that the church is the body of Christ, and as such it operates like a human body (1

Cor. 12:12-31). Each part has a contribution to make and no part is to be despised. At Corinth the tongue speakers thought of themselves as an elite within the church and Paul uses this model of the church to counteract this error. What he does is present an ideal: a church in which every member is active in ministry and all are equally valued. In the real world the church only ever approximates to this ideal – Paul's visionary model always remains the goal of all our communal life. When faced with different errors Paul developed other models of the church (e.g. the temple of the Holy Spirit, the bride of Christ, the bulwark of the truth etc).

### Contemporary Models

With these introductory thoughts in mind we are now in a position to consider seven congregational types. These are all abstractions, differing possible models of congregational life depicted as starkly as possible. Specific congregations either will approximate more to one model than any other, or reflect aspects of two or more models. These models are descriptive in nature, not evaluative. They typify church life apart from theological criteria or denominational labels. The value in constructing such models is that they help us perceive reality more clearly and having done this to see the possibilities for renewal which lie ahead. Different typologies may be constructed, but I have built on the basis of what may be taken as seven essential aspects of a full orb'd doctrine of the church.

These models all capture something basic to Christian communal existence. In each case the model alludes to a congregation, a local church. Theological conviction is the

most formative force in producing the various models of the church, but we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that catholic, or evangelical, or charismatic, or liberal theology always produces a particular model of the church. The reason for this is that there are wide ranging differences within each of these four schools of theology and other forces than theology bear upon the life of any particular church.

### *1. The Church as an Institution*

When a congregation is seen primarily as an institution then the organisational life of the church is what is stressed. Much emphasis is placed on hierarchical leadership, organisational control, bureaucratic decision making, working by rules, producing reports, outlining policy and on buildings and facilities. The church is run like a traditional business and success is evaluated in terms of numbers, meeting budget targets, the quality of equipment and the size and upkeep of the property which is owned. The minister assumes the role of an administrator or manager.

### *2. The Church as a Sacrament*

Another possibility is that the local church will be seen primarily as a dispenser of the sacraments. When this model prevails a great importance is given to the baptism of infants for it is believed that through this sacrament children are incorporated into the church, the body of Christ. But it is the celebration of the eucharist which is central. The faithful assemble not for fellowship or teaching but to partake of 'the medicine of immortality.' Most of the pastoral work in the parish centres on taking the sacrament to the sick, the elderly and the house bound. The minister stands somewhat apart as a holy

person. In ordination a unique power is given to make Christ present in the eucharist. Architecturally the church building is structured like a theatre. The great drama of redemption is repeatedly re-enacted by a colourfully dressed star on stage with a small supporting cast before a hushed audience.

### *3. The Church as Teacher*

Yet another way in which the church may be appear is as a teaching agent. On this model the Christian life is mainly about learning — understanding more of what it means to be a Christian. When the church gathers, the hymns, the prayers and everything else in the service lead to one focal point, the sermon. In the sermon sound teaching is given and applied to life. Architecturally the building for this model of the church is fashioned on the classroom. The large lectern or pulpit is central, the faithful passively sit in rows looking toward the lecturer and the more zealous take notes as the sermon is given. It is understood that members of the church are to submit to their God-given teacher's instruction. During the week the programme revolves around Bible studies where more good teaching is provided. In pastoral visitation 'the Word' is applied to particular problems. The mature believer is understood to be someone well versed in Scripture.

### *4. The Church as Evangelist*

On this model the great commission (Matt. 28:19) to go into the world and preach the Gospel is the blueprint for all church life. When this model prevails every sermon is explicitly evangelistic, every group is evaluated by its evangelistic effectiveness, each baptism is seen as a wonderful evangelistic opportunity,

and every pastoral visit becomes a chance to speak of the new birth. The laity are mobilised as evangelists. They are trained to witness at work and to go out two by two to witness to Christ in the church visitation program.

#### 5. *The Church as Servant*

A fifth model conceives of the church as the presence of Christ in the world ministering to those in special need and standing as their advocate. The church is there to oppose injustice, to side with the powerless to identify with those committed to social change and to the re-distribution of wealth. In the servant church, mission is seen not in terms of preaching the Gospel but as social action, making a better world, the establishing of the values of the Kingdom of God. When the model is embraced the difference between the world and the church is minimised, and serving Christ and working for justice often seems to take priority over gathering for worship.

#### 6. *The Church as Fellowship*

In an alien and secular society, the Christian needs an alternative community. The church seen primarily as a warm and accepting fellowship meets this need. On this model of the church the emphasis falls on good relationships, there are numerous activities within the church so that the faithful can find all their social needs in company with other Christians, and a sharp distinction between Christians and the world is made. There is much hugging and kissing, holding hands and verbal affirmation of one another. As the big fellowship gatherings limit closeness, small groups which meet during the week provide for this need. In this context, personal problems can be shared and prayed about and

practical support and love can be shown. On this model the worship setting is usually set out in the half round and the minister is seen as a facilitator of group life.

#### 7. *The Church as Celebration*

Finally, we describe the church which sees itself as a celebration of redemptive grace. In this church, worship is understood in terms of praise and adoration. It is an anticipation of the wonder of heavenly existence when the believer will be constantly in the presence of Christ. Joyful singing dominates when the community assembles, times of testimony speak of God's triumphs, the expectation that God can and will do great things is a constant theme, and when people pray they often conclude by thanking God for answering their prayer. In this model of the church the architecture makes what is best called the 'stage' the central focus. On this stage there is always found a band and behind it a large overhead screen. Usually a number of people take part in leading the prayer and praise. In this church the contrast between life in the Spirit realised in worship and life in the world with all its brokenness and pain is very stark.

### **Reflection**

Earlier in this article it was suggested that the value of such models or typologies was twofold: to help us see reality more clearly and to provide direction for change. As we reflect on the models just outlined we need to ask ourself to which model or models our congregation approximates most closely, and then, what would we like to see changed.

In thinking about the alternatives, a positive and a negative evaluation should be considered. Positively we

may think of diversity as a reflection of the mind of God. It would seem that variety and difference is part of the creative activity of the God revealed in the Bible. He has made a diverse world, and human beings in general and Christians in particular manifest this. God is not interested in a dreary uniformity. If this is so, then diversity in congregational life is pleasing to God, not something to be overcome. Churches may differ in the emphases they manifest in their corporate life, and in doing so further the purposes of the Lord of the church. Indeed it would seem that often the most dynamic and vital of churches have a clearly spelt out and focussed rationale for their corporate life (and this may be any one of the seven models just outlined).

But, having said this, it does not follow that any model on its own is to be endorsed without reserve. The possibility should be considered, that when one model of the church becomes so dominant that others are excluded, error has appeared. A church seen almost exclusively as an

institution, or as a dispenser of the sacraments, or as a teaching agent, or as an evangelistic community, or as a servant in the world, or as an accepting fellowship, or as celebration has lost something of the varied and dynamic character of that reality which is the body of Christ. It is good, and we dare to suggest pleasing to God, that each congregation lay special emphasis on one or more aspects of church life, but to ignore the others is to become unbalanced. One may be to the fore but the others should not be forgotten. The Christian community needs institutional form; it should value its sacramental life; it has an important teaching function; it must never forget its evangelistic mission; it is to spend itself in service for others; it does assemble together for fellowship; and praise should be at the heart its worship. A stress on one or two of these matters, we are arguing, is fine but to allow one to eclipse all others is dangerous and possibly the first step in becoming sectarian in outlook.

## The Blessed

*With that profound wisdom of the naive,  
We yield what we cannot keep  
To gain what we cannot lose.  
Choosing to die in order to live,  
We reflect the power of Christ's self-giving  
And applaud his crime of forgiveness.*

From *Becoming...* (poetry reflecting theology)  
by Gerry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia  
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## Books Reviewed

*A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* by Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen reviewed by John Olley

*Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul, An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* by P. T. O'Brien reviewed by John Roxborough

*Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Task, Topics, Traditions* by David Willis and Michael Welker (eds) reviewed by John Jefferson Davis

*Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* by John W. Cooper reviewed by James R. Rohrer

*The Wisdom Literature* (Interpreting Biblical Texts series) by Richard J. Clifford reviewed by Tim Meadowcroft

*A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa, 1900-1998* by James Amanze reviewed by Fidelis Nkomazana

*Worship Old and New* (Revised Edition) by Robert Webber reviewed by David Parker

## Book Reviews

ERT (2001) 25/1, 82-88

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### **A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament**

by Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999  
475 pp.; pb  
indices, bibliog., map  
ISBN 0-687-01348-8

*Reviewed by Dr. John Olley  
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Where is there a textbook for introductory courses that treats the Old Testament 'as a resource for (students') own ministry and the life of the church?' Out of shared frustration four prominent Old Testament scholars from different Protestant seminaries in the USA (Wesley,

Columbia, Luther and Liff) have written a book that 'seeks to discuss the Old Testament in theological terms at a level appropriate to introductory seminary students' (from the Preface, p. 11).

The work differs significantly from most 'theologies' of the Old Testament in that it takes 'the narrative story of Israel and its faith experience as now reflected in the shape of the Hebrew canon (as) the most appropriate framework' (p. 12). This is not a 'systematic theology', nor does it have a structure other than the narrative outline. The strength of the approach is that theology is rooted in socio-historical experience and so is portrayed as vital and dynamic, rather than an intellectual abstraction.

The opening chapter gives students an excellent introduction to methodology (18 pp.), including a stirring affirmation of the continuity of Israel's God and ours. The next