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Evangelical Catholicity—A Possible Foundation for Exploring Relational Responsibility in a Global Community?

John Beckett

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Introduction

It was the day after Christmas, 26 January 2004. My wife and I had just enjoyed a wonderful Christmas day at Whistler in Canada, one of the most beautiful places in the world. We were staying in a spacious and well appointed condominium on the mountain with family and friends. We had enjoyed a wonderful Christmas meal, both plentiful and tasty. There was much to be thankful for.

As I recall, it was nearing lunch time and we were about to settle down for another long meal. I went into our bedroom for a few minutes and turned on the television. I was shocked by images of the tsunami in South East Asia appearing on the screen. There

was mass devastation and loss of life. After a short time I was called to lunch. I remember my father-in-law, who as far as I know was unaware of the terrible devastation of the tsunami, praying a simple and beautiful prayer thanking the Lord for the many blessings that he had lavished upon us in these days.

I was struck by the tension of that day and that moment. Certainly the prayer was an appropriate one. I agreed that the Lord's gracious provision was lavish and worthy of exuberant thanks, but how could we pray that prayer and be thankful when other lives were being devastated? Strangely my mind did not turn to questions about God and suffering as one might expect. Rather, the question at the front of my mind was whether I personally had any responsibility to respond in this situation. I was certain that it was the responsibility of the people of God to respond in this situation. I also had a clear understanding of

John Beckett is the National Coordinator of Micah Challenge Australia. He was previously Partnerships Director for African Enterprise. John completed his Masters in Theology at Regent College in Vancouver and now speaks and writes on the global responsibility of Christians and churches. A leader, Bible teacher and mentor, John lives in Sydney with his beautiful wife Allie.

myself as one of the people of God, but was it *my* responsibility? If so, in what way?

My perception is that many Evangelicals, when confronted with a question like this, consider first the pragmatics of the situation. For example, the tendency is to ask questions like, 'What is the most strategic use of resources?' or 'Who is best located to respond physically to this situation?' While there is nothing wrong with these questions, do the people asking them have any theological understanding of why they are asking such questions, or any theological motivation for responding, or not responding, as the case may be?

When we see great need, where does the strength to engage come from when our first tendency may be to disengage? Where does the capacity to love extraordinarily come from, particularly when one feels disconnected from the specific context of another's need? The events of that day prompted the question before us in this brief case study; *How do believers and churches determine their responsibility to others within and beyond the people of God?*

The answer to that question lies in two more foundational questions. The first of these questions is '*What is my relationship to others?*' Humans do not consider themselves responsible for any and every person, nor should they. Rather, responsibility is connected to the nature and strength of the relationship that exists between two people or within a community of people. The second foundational question is, '*What is my purpose?*' An individual's understanding of their purpose for existence determines the purpose of their relationships and whether they have

responsibility in certain situations. Purpose, for all humans, but more particularly and consciously for believers, is determined by God's purpose in creating them. Christian believers do not exist only for self; they exist to participate in the *missio Dei*, God's missional movement to all of his creation.

Catholicity—The Potential for an Integrated Approach?

Broadly speaking, the first of the above questions has to do with being or identity and the second with purpose. Too often, in both theological discourse and missional reflection, identity has been divorced from purpose. Determining responsibility for individual believers requires the bringing together and integration of these two.¹ I submit that such integration is possible if we focus on a particular understanding of catholicity.

Before discussing catholicity further it is necessary for me to outline a number of key assumptions in my argument. In this discussion I assume that *it is the mission of individual believers to live in the local church as an anticipation of the catholic people of God, to invite others into that community*, and ultimately to become that community. This statement affirms the local church as the normative New Testament community for the expression of human relational-

1 However, there are various nuances to this meaning derived from the variety of contexts in which it was used in classical Greek. For outlines of the usage and derivation of the term, see H. Kung, *The Church* (New York: Image Books, 1967), 296-300 and A. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 14-29.

ity. It affirms that those who are included in Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the present are already included in the eschatological community of the people of God. Therefore, membership of that community forms part of the believer's identity within history. That community will be the fulfillment of the *imago Dei*, perfectly imaging the relational life of the Trinity. Finally, the statement affirms that an essential part of the life of the individual believer is inviting people into the community of the people of God, because the church in history is always incomplete in reference to the catholic people of God.

The particular component of this statement that is our focus here is the *catholicity* of the people of God. Miroslav Volf's perspective on catholicity holds potential, I believe, to help us begin to answer the question before us. Volf goes beyond the usual definitions of catholicity as *universal expansion* of the church or *complete faith*, and argues that catholicity is best understood as *fullness*. *Kat'holou*, from which both the word catholicity and the concept are derived, means a whole, not missing any of the parts which necessarily constitute it.² Volf therefore supports a qualitative understanding of catholicity which is necessarily understood in relation to a certain reference point or goal. While it is true that a local church can be called catholic because it has within it everything it needs in order to be *whole* in reference to ecclesiality,³ its goal is not

merely to be church and its own boundaries are not the limits of its telos. Volf states that 'a local church can be catholic only by way of a connection with an ecclesiological whole transcending it'.⁴ Because church is the gathered *people* of God, the *telos* of the church, its ultimate end, is to be that same *people* gathered together and completed in the eschaton. This is the only gathering of God's people that will be complete and therefore *whole*. Therefore the eschatological people of God is the referent point for the catholicity of any church. Consequently a local church must always be moving toward, and living in light of, the catholicity of the people of God.

If one supports this definition of catholicity, then catholicity and mission are mutually determinative. The missional nature of the church has its foundation in the catholic identity of the eschatological people of God and the missional activity of the church becomes the means by which the church anticipates and ultimately fulfils its catholic identity. The catholic identity of the church requires that it continually moves beyond itself, meaning that the church's catholic identity becomes a motivation for mission. The anticipation of this catholicity requires the intentional formation of relationships within the body. These relationships form part of the means for mission. It is only *in relationship* and *by way of relationship* that the church can actively play its part in the mission of God. In this paradigm, mission becomes the God-given and God-inspired means by which the church

2 That is, the whole Christ and the whole means of salvation.

3 M. Volf, *After our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 272.

4 Volf, *After*, 264ff.

moves from its incomplete and broken nature in the present to its true and whole nature as the people of God in the eschaton. That is to say, the church cannot be faithful to a local/global missional mandate unless it is actively *living out* and *pursuing* its catholicity.⁵

There are two dimensions to the church's anticipation of catholicity. Participation in the *missio Dei* is both the temporal expansion associated with church growth models for mission and also the healing of brokenness in relationships through intentional reconciliation. The mission of God will be effective only if relationships *within* the community, and those between believers in the community and those *beyond* the community, are properly functioning. Properly functioning relationships within the community are necessary if the church is to fulfil its missional mandate to be salt and light by modelling a redeemed community, and also to be a prophetic witness to society.⁶ Engagement in relationships beyond the boundaries of the church community is necessary in order to be faithful to the call to proclaim and witness to those outside the boundaries of the church who need to hear.

Catholicity and Relational Responsibility

This perspective on catholicity only reinforces that there is a global inter-

dependence between believers as we participate in the *missio Dei*. This global interdependence is based on a common Spirit-mediated identity and a common Spirit-mediated mission. Inclusion in the people of God and a commitment to this common goal is intrinsic to the salvation of all individual believers. It is a necessary part of the life of the believer and the churches of which they are a part. The local church is the normative venue for the believer to enact the relational responsibility that goes hand in hand with this interdependence. However, a broadening of relational responsibility beyond the local church is also necessary.

This represents little more than a beginning point. The application of this thinking to specific contexts such as the one outlined at the beginning of this discussion is by no means simple. Believers cannot, nor are they called, to love all their brothers and sisters in the same way. Within history there are differing levels of relational responsibility between all people. Both Old and New Testament authors assume these distinctions. In the Old Testament the nation of Israel is clearly chosen by God and set apart (Ex. 6:7; Deut. 7:6; 2 Chr. 7:14). There is a distinction in relational responsibility within the nation of Israel and beyond it (Ruth 1:16-2:7). The Mosaic Law outlines different designations and responsibilities concerning one's family as opposed to servants, widows, orphans and neighbours.

In the New Testament some of these relational distinctions are broken down. Certainly the way is opened for all people to be members together in the people of God (Gal. 3:26-29). The distinctions between slave and free,

⁵ This is an already/not yet tension. Believers-in-relation are catholic and therefore that catholicity takes on concrete forms. At the same time, the fulfillment of that catholicity in the eschaton, although guaranteed, must be pursued.

⁶ See Mt. 5:13-16.

male and female, Jew and Gentile are broken down and all are made *one* in Christ. Yet at the same time there is the acknowledgement in the pages of the New Testament that within history various distinctions in relational responsibility remain. In particular there is a responsibility to care for one's own family (1 Tim. 5:4-8) and a heightened responsibility for mutual care amongst believers (Gal. 6:10). There are also both local examples of interdependence and broader examples of interdependence. (See Acts 2: 44-47; 2 Cor. 8-9).

In scripture believers are commanded both to *love our neighbour* and to *go into all the world*. A tension exists between these two realities which must somehow be maintained. Although the world is always in view, Jesus explicitly states in Luke 10 that the key to inheriting eternal life is found in the fulfillment of the two great commandments: that is, through the two-fold love of God and neighbour. He goes on to exegete the love of neighbour by telling the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:29). There is both *limitation* and *expansion* in the story.

While the Samaritan responds to one who comes into his immediate sphere of influence, there is no scope for humans to impose their own limitations of culture, nationality, age, gender or social status on the determination of who our neighbour is. We must always be willing to expand our sphere of influence beyond its present boundaries in response to the needs and opportunities God presents to us. Like the Samaritan, our love of neighbour is a way of living rather than a set of regulations.

For too long, I believe, evangelicals have motivated the believers in our churches into action by propagating a simplistic and pragmatic mission-focused alliance where the perceived end of mission justifies many and varied means. We need to recapture our identity as the catholic community of God's people. If we allow that identity to be both the foundation that shapes us and the goal toward which we work, perhaps we open ourselves up to be used by the Spirit to more faithfully and effectively represent Christ to a watching world.

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