

Church and ministry
What is the church?
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Jason John
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 2725 words¹

" Jason is an outstanding individual, totally accepting of everybody he meets, showing them the unconditional love that he is aware of, minute by minute, from God. Faultless in prayers, and unceasing in bible reading, Jason still finds time to tackle the injustices of the world, speaking God's wisdom and judgment to an unjust society.

Kind to his parents, and untiring in his tutorial reading, Jason truly loves all creation as himself, whether it be the cat that ate his budgie, or his partner, whom he ensures is fully satisfied each night.

And a comment?

" The most useful thing to say about the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church is that it does not exist. There is a bunch of people who believe that Jesus of Nazareth was, and maybe is, someone very special, and a few of them get together regularly to talk about it. To claim anything more for this group is to engage in wild flights of fancy. "

Anon

" Actually, that might be going a bit too far. "

Ibid

¹May the others rest in peace. ☹

"In comparison with history or sociology, which would attempt to describe what the church actually is and does empirically, theology is somewhat more idealistic."²

Introduction

I wonder whether some traditionalist theologians ever attend church³. They define the church as what it should be⁴, rather than what we experience it to be. I believe that this causes a dysfunctional relationship between church attenders on the one hand, and nominal Christians, and non Christians on the other⁵. I suspect that the false self-perception is maintained because, although traditionalist attenders⁶ comprise only a fraction of the world's population⁷, they only listen to their own ecclesiologies⁸, which implicitly equate the church with attenders, especially through their use of words like "gathering" and "community". They thus exclude from the church the overwhelming majority of people who identify themselves as Christians, but do not attend Sunday worship.

²Haight, R, *An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology*, p. 179.

³By traditionalists I mean people who view Scripture, and/or Papal/church council statements, as the superior, if not only, source of understanding for the Christian in the world today.

⁴Based on a narrow reading of scripture, and the Nicene creed. Even quickly skimming the scriptures I found examples in every New Testament book that contradicted Nicene and other idealistic definitions of church.

⁵Passons, W. R., *Gestalt approaches in counselling*, p. ? is one of many who explain the destructiveness of an individual having a falsely ideal view of themself, the concept ought to apply equally to a community.

⁶I have in mind here Christians who are regularly involved in some sort of worship gathering, be it an institutional denomination, house church, or base Christian community. In this paper I will call them 'attenders'. They are distinguished from nominals, who consider themselves to be Christians but do not regularly attend such gatherings.

⁷About 10% of Australian attend church more than monthly. Nominals comprise 40%-80% of Australian denominations, 60% in the Uniting Church (Hughes, P., "Nominalism", *Trinity Occasional Papers* (March 93), p. 63).

⁸Nominals don't tend to write theological papers, and secular sociologists can't understand the church because they are faithless.

less strong
use that
either prop
-Prat focus on
inner (sacred)
outer (social)
person
Luther.

wordy (I was once a firm believer in the marks of the church, and delighted in definitions of church that made me feel special. My conversion lead to a deep sense of sin, and the idealistic models of church gave me hope that I wasn't really what I seemed to be. My horror at discovering that ^{ch} ~~all~~ attenders, even mature ones, were far removed from what the bible said they were often made me question the reality of the faith and its claims for Jesus over the first few months, but the doubts subsided. I was very dismissing^{ve} of the rest of society, of the possibility of any non Christian offering meaningful wisdom, or being able to truly love. If I, with my special gift of the Holy Spirit, couldn't love someone purely, a pagan sure as hell couldn't!

? (

^{Original student}
My studies at Parkin Wesley, and continued relationships with outsiders at University and home made my idealism more and more untenable^{12,4}. Last year I read widely and discovered a range of Christian attitudes to non Christians, and to issues of personal versus social morality. This made so much more sense to me, but my local congregation was unable, or unwilling to accomodate my different views, and, feeling increasingly like the invisible man, I left. I do not reject all of my biblicist introduction to the faith, but can no longer swallow idealistic definitions of the church.

too personal (

The idealists

see 1992-93

soften (Leith, Erickson, and Hodgson & King are dreamers. Leith dutifully recites the marks of the church with no attempt to address the chasm between the ideal and the experienced. There are numerous contradictions: He attests to the unity of the church one page before mentioning murderous schisms¹³.

¹²It seems that the idealistic view of church, and particularly negative view of society, is most easily maintained by those with few emotional bonds outside the church.

¹³Leith, J. H., *Basic Christian Doctrine*, pp. 241, 242.

He says that, "The church is holy, then in the sense that it is...not yet perfect...it has not yet reached its goal of holiness.¹⁴" He later admits that a sociologist "could explain [the Corinthian Church] solely in secular terms, including its divisions, greed, and sexual aberrations.¹⁵" What he doesn't do is say how, in light of this, he can be so sure that the church really is Unified and Holy, and that we, and we only, live in obedience to the risen Lord¹⁶.

Erickson at least admits admits the discrepancies between the ideal and real (my words), but solves this by calling for the removal of those who are not 'true believers', thereby trying to make the church what he thinks it should be, ^(according to his reading of script) rather than describing it as it is¹⁷. Hodgson & King approach the problem dualistically. They accept that the church is full of both saints and sinners¹⁸, but, far from being an inclusive, tolerant understanding, it actually promotes a false superiority among the 'saints'. It denies the repeatedly demonstrated reality that, in my experience, and from the evidence presented below, each member of the church is both saint and sinner, as is every other member of society. Their final definition of the church is a pinnacle of unjustifiable optimism. They admit, ^{that} the church isn't actually what they say it is¹⁹, but how does that help?

The Contextualists²⁰

de Gruchy is a reformed theologian from South African, where the church has been fundamentally divided²¹. He highlights the absurdity of claiming that a church which contains both the oppressed and their oppressors can possibly be considered to be ~~in unity~~ ^{united}²². He says that Christians share a

¹⁴Leith p. 242-3.

¹⁵Leith p. 245.

¹⁶Leith, pp. 236, 235.

¹⁷Erickson, M. J., *Christian Theology*, p. 1098, 1099.

¹⁸Hodgson, P. C. & King, R. H. (eds), *Christian Theology* 2nd edn, p. 260 - 261

¹⁹*ibid*, p. 271

Hodgson, P. C. &
Williams, R. C.,
"The church", in

"longing to be faithful to Jesus Christ", but this seems over optimistic in the light of the rest of his discussion.

That the Dutch reformed church could provide the theological underpinning for Apartheid, and continue to support it until 1982, makes the notion of a 'holy' church fanciful stuff indeed²³.

de Gruchy still tries to define the true church, from the criterion of justice. Either we anathematise a huge section of the church, or allow attenders to identify themselves uncritically with these new marks, or we must admit that, though Jesus calls us to justice, in fact the true church is usually no more just than the rest of society. If we admit the discrepancy, we may be prompted to change, which is exactly what de Gruchy desires.

Haight testifies that the church, "tends to mirror the society in which it exists."²⁴ , and that its leaders tend towards, "the demonic domination of human freedom in the name of God."²⁵, clearly refuting that the church is Holy, or fundamentally different in expression from society. Perhaps his most useful definition (he has several) begins with the recognition that the question, "What is the church?" is not about its static, ontological structure, but its relationship to God²⁶. He argues that God works outside the church in other faith filled communities, and that it is not clear that God wants everyone to become Christian. Of all the grace filled communities, though, "the church is constituted

²⁰Realists?

²¹de Gruchy, J., *Liberating Reformed Theology*, p. 223, "the fact of the matter is that we are not all on the same side, and we do not all believe in the same gospel."

²²"...outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace." *The Kairos document*, pp. 1-2, in de Gruchy, p. 221.

²³Before we try to anathematise the Dutch Reformed Church, apartheid was also promoted in southern America by people such as John Rice, and lapped up by conservative Australian pastors like John Smith, as attested to in his book, *On the side of the Angels*, pp. 92-93.

²⁴Haight, p. 183.

²⁵*Ibid*, p. 181.

²⁶*Ibid*, p. 167

by those who are explicitly aware of God and God's salvific design for human existence through Jesus Christ.²⁷

f.d.g. (Unfortunately some of his definitions of the church ignores his own criticisms.²⁸.. His closing paragraphs admit this idealistic tendency, and concede that "Ideals in themselves do not solve problems, but they do serve as norms and guide lines." His idealism, though regrettable, is at least not dangerous, because it is acknowledged.

Remember that this opposes Kant, Schur etc who see ch. as the sac. of int? Moltmann agrees with Haight that the church has no monopoly on the Holy Spirit. He explicitly rejects any attempt to see the church as a model or prototype for the rest of the community, on the realisation that, due to the true nature of the church, this puts too much strain on the attenders. They just can't live up to the ideal²⁹. His critique of the Communist Manifesto's idealistic view of society³⁰ can surely be applied against an idealistic view of the church. In the church, just as in society, resources run out, and competition ensues, to the detriment of the 'common good.'³¹

He shares Haight's very positive view of secular common interest groups working for self-help or liberation of others, and of the teaming of Christians and non Christians in these tasks³². Although he does not directly challenge the "One, Holy" marks, he does prevent us assigning those marks to the church over and against society. Both have members or subgroups that exhibit unity

²⁷*Ibid*, p. 174. This is better than his other definitions, for example, on pp. 173 and 162 which focus on the church as the gathered people, implicitly excluding nominals. The shortcoming of the definition, in its call for explicit awareness, is its exclusion of children and the mentally disabled²⁷.

? (²⁸"...the tangible expression or sacrament of how God relates to human experience and of the purposes of God for personal and collective freedom." *Ibid*, p. 178.

²⁹Moltmann, J., *The Spirit of Life*, pp. 231-2.

³⁰*Ibid*, p. 251.

³¹The church suffers resource shortage, for example the minister's time, and where money is to be spent. Also the tie to be given to various worship styles, how the church should be laid out etc. Congregations have even split over which song book to use.

³²Moltmann especially p. 241-5.

and holiness within themselves, neither can demonstrate this in all their subgroups.

relevant? (Unfortunately, Moltmann draws the Christian circle around those who have been baptised and joined a recognised church³³. This excludes Salvation Army attenders, and the children of those in churches that practice adult baptism.

More seriously, although he highlights the importance of the Christian's life in society, he still assumes that the church is comprised of people who gather on Sundays then disperse throughout the week. Though he condemns the ghetto mentality³⁴, he does not explicitly give Christians who do not gather at all a place in the church. Again, however, his high value of secular activities implies that, had he taken the time to address the issue specifically, he would have included nominals in the church.

Schillebeeckx appeared to be a little inconsistent³⁵, but makes a very important contribution to the issue at hand. Towards the end of the book he states that, "The church is not the Kingdom of God, but it bears symbolic witness to that Kingdom through its word and sacrament..." This appears to be a classic idealism of the church. It doesn't address the issue that often the church *does not* bear a witness to what we understand the Kingdom of God to be, either through what is preached or how the sacrament is administered, especially in face of the closed table policy of some denominations.

It does, however, leave open the possibility that the Kingdom can be witnessed to by secular groups in other ways. This is made explicit at the start of the book, where he outright denies any ontological, or even necessarily practical, difference between Christians and non Christians. He says ~~that~~ "The fundamental question is not, 'Do you believe in God?' but, 'which side will you take in the battle of good versus evil?', and that, "Belief in God does not make

³³*Ibid.*, p. 234-5.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵I have only read selected chapters of his book, so I can't say for sure.

Christians any more human than the rest." The fundamental distinction for Schilleebeckx, then, is not attender vs nominal/pagan, but whether one is on the side of good or evil, in solidarity with oppressed or oppressor³⁶.

rework
reword (Ruether's work supports the somewhat glib opening question in this paper. The isolation and distance from the laity³⁷ allowed them to construct models of the church that do not reflect reality. Just as the Pharisees' definition of the true faith community in their day unjustly excluded many, and drew Jesus' wrath, perhaps idealistic models of the church exclude those with too much integrity to live with the obvious contradiction between their idealised, versus realised self. Perhaps if the laity had had more of a voice to demand that their experience be a major factor in defining the church, these idealistic models would never have arisen.

Russel begins with her experience of a vibrant, mostly homosexual church, which she contrasts with the introverted, individualistic tendency of most American churches. She denounces the unity of the church as based on the exclusion of those who do not fit the ideal model³⁸. The church is not holy in the original sense of the word (just, merciful, faithful), but rather expresses its 'holiness' as separation and individualistic moralism.

An especially helpful contribution is her understanding that the signs must be used as "descriptive, rather than prescriptive, avoiding the patriarchal pattern of dogmatism." She believes that historical descriptions of the church are, "helpful... *indicators* of faithfulness, even though they are clearly *not* helpful as rules used to exclude others."³⁹ This opens the door for unjust people to be part of the church, since we cannot swap one form of exclusion for another, but

³⁶Schilleebeckx, E., *Church: The human story of God.*, p. 7.

³⁷Ruether, R., R., *Women-Church*, p. 75.

³⁸Russel, p. 133

³⁹*ibid*, pp. 136, 132.

in so doing it highlights the reality of who the church actually is. More positively, it includes nominals, the mentally disabled, and non baptised people, who share some, but not all, of the historical ^{more's} descriptions of the church.

To summarise the contributions from the contextualists, we should not try to define the church ontologically, but rather ~~describe~~ ^{from the nature of how it relates} its relationship to God. We must not use marks that exclude people from the church, but rather offer a broad picture with a range of possible features. Church is a part of God's society, not over and against it. We should therefore not be primarily concerned with statements of faith, but with ^hwether people place themselves on the side of good or evil. This is not to create a new fundamental division, since we experience that we all change sides regularly, but it points to where our concern should be focussed.

The above militates against attempting a comprehensive definition of the church. Therefore I will ~~close~~ with a very loose description, and a suggestion of the implications for ministry in the Uniting Church.

Towards a sketch of the church

The schism and unholiness of the modern church ought not suprise us. Jesus' followers have been argumentative, dull, ^owicked & ^operverse, judgmental, and self seeking since the beginning⁴⁰. They were only different from society in that they walked with Jesus, or tried to. Even after Pentecost, the supposed magic transformation, church schism, bickering, immorality, racism and sexism continue⁴¹. Again, the only common bond was that they were somehow responding to what God had done though Jesus Christ. As persecution began,

⁴⁰Mt 16:22, Mk 8:17, Lk 9:41, Lk 9:54, Mk 10:37, respectively. These are only a selection of many references.

⁴¹1Jn 2:19ff, Ac 6:1, Ro 2, Ac 11:1-4, 1 Co 14, 1Ti 2:11-15, respectively. Again, there are many more references.

What does 'you mean?' It might be true, but I'm not sure. JJ11

some of them sought clearer, ontological boundaries.) Now that persecution is over, it is time to take them down, acknowledging the good and wickedness in both.

This is not to say that the church is ~~nothing~~ different, it is to say that we, and all our forebears, are the sometimes argumentative, dull, wicked & perverse, judgmental, self seeking part of society that nonetheless recognises that there is a God, revealed in Jesus Christ, to whom we respond ^{are to our inward understanding.}
~~It would be wonderful that we respond to God in X~~ ^{at the impl. of the gospel?}

This Jesus, though not all Christians believe this, is the unique Son of God, who proclaims a love from God that transcends cultural, religious, and gender boundaries, and who proclaims God's thirst for a just and compassionate society. I would like to say that as a church we take up this call, and thereby sacramentalise the love of God for the world, but this is obviously not the case. Those who sacramentalise God are not those who say they believe in the Kingdom Come, but those who work for it, consciously or not. Nobody is a perfect sacrament of God, nobody is a perfect anti-sacrament. Unfortunately, the church doesn't even appear to predominate at the good end of the spectrum. It seems that the suggestion on ~~ten~~ front page wasn't going too far after all.

Where to from here?

I have characterised people as existing on a spectrum of good and evil actions, with no significant difference in the distribution of church and non church members along it. While Schillebeeckx and others take the lack of difference seriously in their ecclesiologies, there appears to be no ecclesiology that takes nominalism seriously, though Hughes begins to theologise about it.

Ransenburg's "Theological Foundations"

The renewal of the diaconate necessitates such a response, since, among others, they will be in direct ministry with nominals.

issue of where should
Sec be celebrated, & 2 whom?

Very briefly, we face the following questions:

1) Are people who claim to be Christians, and Uniting Church members, but who don't attend a recognised congregation, really part of our church, and therefore the responsibility of our ministers?

Oh, I see! I'd
been having trouble
getting this point
across!

2) If so, is one or two ordinations more likely to affirm (to us and them), their membership, since they will be ministered to primarily by deacons?

3) Similarly, given the reformed focus on the Supper as a mark of the church, does removing the sacramental nature from deacon's ministry reflect our belief that people can be a part of the Uniting Church without attending a recognised congregation?

4) If people who claim membership of the Uniting Church are *not* to be regarded as members, what is the theological justification for this?

A large section of the church will not agree with my world view. What cannot be escaped, however, is the need to think hard about our relationship to the 60% of the UC who don't ^{come} on Sunday, and how we can best nurture and represent that relationship through the diaconate.

(Having just read the UC 1990 ordination document, there is some hope in its pointing the church to follow the move in the direction of the NT. Just as ordⁿ of G is the culmination of something incompletely begun by the NT, so could a non-ontological view of the church be, the recogⁿ that God we are all fundamentally God's children. The document's view of Sec also is more in line with needed for such an argument)

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