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Mapping the Church

Current Challenges of History and Mission

David Fergusson

In what follows I seek to articulate three key claims. First, we should avoid simple definitions of the church by favoring instead a models-based approach that suggests a plurality of ways of being and acting. Second, we should contest the relentless deconstruction of church history by seeking a more nuanced account that balances repentance with appreciation. And third, we should inspect some of the inflated claims around mission for the sake of a more sober reading of our current condition and our likely short-term future.

The Church as a Necessary Condition of Christian Faith

From my time as an undergraduate in the 1970s, I recall a talk by Professor Murdo Ewan McDonald in Glasgow. He tackled the claim by Malcolm Muggeridge that we should dispense with the church and concentrate on Jesus only. Provoked by this suggestion, Murdo Ewan wanted to engage Muggeridge in public debate. He indicated that he would put two points to him. Did not Jesus gather around himself a group of disciples who were the harbingers of the church? The formation of a body of followers was surely

integral to Jesus' ministry—any attempt to separate these is anachronistic. His second claim was that the only way in which the story of Jesus could be transmitted is through the medium of the church. The gospels themselves are the product of the early church and without the sustained witness of the institution through the centuries neither he nor Muggeridge would have received the faith. These two points remain fundamentally correct in my opinion and provide an argument for the necessity of the church. But there is a third claim that also needs to be articulated which is part of the case against separation of Jesus and the church. As the body of Christ, the church is the community in which Christian faith is experienced, nurtured, and celebrated. The Christian life may not be confined to the church, but it cannot be lived except in this communal setting with other Christians. Its significance is not merely instrumental. There are of course examples of people who have managed to keep the faith while separated from the church. Confined to his prison cell, Bonhoeffer is one heroic case. Yet his separation from fellow Christians was a constant source of lament, especially on Sundays when he was acutely conscious of his absence from the worshipping community. In a seminal essay, Andrew Walls has written,

> [T]he first effect of Christian expansion is not the production of saved or enlightened individuals, but of congregations . . . The influence of Jesus not only produces group response; it works by means of groups, and is expressed in groups. The influence of Jesus, that is, operates in terms of social relations.[1]

The sacrament of baptism makes good sense in this respect. As a mark, recognized by the ecumenical church, it signals not only a commitment to Christ but membership of his body, the church. These remain inseparable. Calvin is insistent on this point, repeating Cyprian's claim that you cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the church as your Mother.[2]

The Need to Inflect Traditional Ecclesial Dictums

In one sense, there has always been a doctrine of the church, if we intend by this a substantial body of theological literature that reflects upon the church as both a divine creation and a human institution. And there have been

1. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 10–11.
2. Calvin. *Institutes*, 1012.

some notable contributions to this in recent years, not least by Tom Greggs.[3] At the same time, we should note Pannenberg's observation that the church was not a subject of sustained theological investigation until relatively late. He points out that the doctrine of the church did not become a separate locus of theological study until the late middle ages and the Reformation.[4] While theologians wrote about the church, especially Cyprian and Augustine, they did so in occasional ways, often in other contexts and drawing upon a multiplicity of images. Despite some schisms, notably that of the Donatists in Augustine's time, the doctrine of the church was not developed in the manner of other loci since it was not the site of major ecclesiastical division. The claim that the church was one, holy, catholic, and apostolic was made in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catecheses* (c350), these four adjectives later appearing in the Nicene Creed (381). Notwithstanding this body of work, Pannenberg maintains that the Reformers were the first to introduce the church as a discrete dogmatic theme, for example in the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559) with Calvin's extended treatment of the true church, its marks, offices, and sacraments. The task here was not to defend innovation as to indicate continuity with and recovery of apostolic themes.

Despite the historical consensus, some of the better-known slogans in ecclesiology have recently been problematized and are in need of some restatement, if not discarding. The aforementioned Nicene Creed speaks of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. This has been widely accepted throughout the ecumenical church, though questions were raised in the sixteenth century about where it was to be located and how it was to be recognized. The marks or notes of the church in the Reformed confessions were an attempt to address this problem. The church was visible through Word and sacrament—the preaching of the Word of God and the correct administration of the two sacraments. The ecumenical advantage of this claim lay in part in its minimalism. The *satis est* of the Augsburg Confession enabled recognition of any church where Word and sacrament could be discerned.[5] This enables us to view different churches, despite still lacking full visible unity, as making a vital contribution to the wider body of the universal church. In our own time, the project of receptive ecumenism seems to be governed by this assumption.[6] Notwithstanding the failure of

3. Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, vol. 1.
4. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 21–27.
5. Augsburg Confession VII.
6. Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*.

ecumenical aspirations in the late twentieth century, the need for greater visible unity remains a Scriptural and missional imperative.

The Augustinian distinction between the visible and invisible church was frequently employed at the Reformation. By separating these, one could distinguish the invisible company of the elect through the ages from the visible church into which entire populations were baptized. The visible church could thus remain an authentic church of Word and sacrament, even though not all its adherents belonged to the elect. One could also hold that the elect might include some not adhering to the visible church through the mark of baptism, though this remained a point of division amongst the Reformers.[7]

With the tendency in modern theology to reconfigure the relationship between the church and the world, the distinction between the visible and the invisible church has had to be recast, both in Catholic (Vatican II) and Protestant theology.[8] If the church is witness, foretaste, and sign of the coming kingdom of God, then its fundamental identity is visible.[9] A purer invisible church requires a doctrine of election that stresses a decreed and final separationism. This has generally not commended itself to modern ecumenical theologians. Yet the visible-invisible distinction does not need to be abandoned entirely. If notion of an invisible church can provide us with a keen sense of our links in the *communio sanctorum* to the church across space and time, then it continues to serve a useful function. This need not be tied to earlier assumptions about the nature of Christendom and the doctrine of election.

A further difficulty with characterizing the visible church in terms of its two marks is the lack of sufficiency in the definition. Word and sacrament are necessary but what about church order, offices, oversight, government, and forms of historical continuity? Such concerns moved Bucer and the authors of the Scots Confession to add a third mark, namely that of pastoral discipline. Today we are nervous around this supplementary note, partly owing to its subsequent preoccupation with sexual morality. Yet its

7. These ecclesial distinctions were not without their practical tensions after the Reformation. Was the church a national institution into which everyone was to be baptized or a gathered company of those adhering to the true faith? See Spurlock, "Boundaries of Scottish Reformed Orthodoxy 1560–1700," 359–76.

8. For example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 722–55.

9. George Lindbeck points out that there was never a doctrine of the invisible Israel. "The Church," 179–208.

intention was to underscore the importance of order, justice, and the common good of both church and society.

Problems around the sufficiency of any one definition of the church have led to contrasting approaches that are shaped by a series of models; these have roots in the multiplicity of Scriptural images of the church. This has obvious advantages. A plethora of images in the New Testament is evident, e.g., the body of Christ, the household of God, the creation of the Holy Spirit, the people of faith, the called, and the elect. Other notions such as the vine, the bride and the flock illustrate both the relationship of church to Christ and of the members to one another. Paul Minear discerns a startling ninety-six images.[10] The unity of the church, the diversity of gifts and ministries distributed by the Spirit, the equality of the members, the emergence of disparate offices and the need for order: these are all important and reflect various crises during the apostolic age. Given its complexity, we need images rather than an Aristotelian definition to capture the richness and multi-dimensionality of the church. There is a danger of essentializing it with one single image or account of order, thus missing its diverse expressions by excluding all but one form. This recognition is an ecumenical breakthrough.

Avery Dulles's treatment of the models of the church has become something akin to a modern classic. He distinguishes six models, while exploring the value and limitations of each. His argument is that all are needed to generate a balanced and rounded ecclesiology that avoids an over-determination of one perspective or set of actions. His six models comprise the church as an institution (a traditional Catholic notion), the church as a mystical body (including the body of Christ and people of God), the church as a sacramental sign (reflecting the Vatican 2 notion of "sign"), the church as herald (a more Protestant notion of witness), the church as servant (a greater stress on the diaconal role of the church to the world is provided here), and as community of disciples (the links to Jesus' calling of the twelve are explicit here). Dulles registers some telling criticisms of each but acknowledges that there should be room for all in tackling an agenda of contemporary problems. His last model was added to the 2002 edition of the work in an attempt to find a setting in which the other five can be anchored.[11]

10. Minnear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*.

11. Dulles, *Models of the Church*.

Two additional problems can be detected in the classical Reformation statement of the dual marks of the church, and these will form the bulk of what remains in this essay. One concerns history and the other mission. The historical problem is already evident in what became known as the Protestant time warp. With the perceived need to secede from the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers faced the dual challenge of establishing their links with the apostolic church of the New Testament and the early centuries, while simultaneously so stressing the corruption of the institution that was being abandoned that its continuity with the apostolic church could be contested. This generated a vague sense that a thousand years of church history were a dark age that had now been corrected by a sudden return to a purified church. Although this is something of a caricature when we consider the liturgical, theological, and legal continuities with the late middle ages, nevertheless elements have persisted in the Protestant mindset. No doubt that has often been encouraged by a theological curriculum which too quickly jumped from Augustine to the Reformers in its attention to doctrinal matters.

But the problem of church history runs deeper today. To make sense of the church, we have to tell a story about ourselves. (This applies *mutatis mutandis* to other institutions too). The story requires to be positive and to have a measure of plausibility under the scrutiny of the historian. In the case of the church, there are strong theological reasons for assuming that the emergence of the Christian faith made a difference both to its adherents and to the wider world. The transformative potential of the gospel in the lives of the followers of Jesus confirms its claims. A constitutive feature of Christian faith is that the appearance of a new and unique society of believers in the first century, together with its many subsequent expressions, made a positive difference. These claims are already ventured in the New Testament, particularly in the first attempt to write a history of the church in the Acts of the Apostles. From this inheritance, our own practice of the faith is enriched and connected with that of the ecumenical church. Yet the problem today is that such claims are the target of a relentless hermeneutics of suspicion with the exposure of dubious practices, mixed motives, and shameful episodes; these then fuel secular narratives about shaking off the yoke of traditional faith claims. Nietzsche got there before the new atheists with his oft-quoted remark. “Better songs they will have to sing for me

before I learn to believe in their redeemer; more redeemed his disciples would have to look."[12]

A further lacuna is that the two marks make no reference to mission, a subject that has become central to many recent theological descriptions of the church, not to mention policy shifts regarding the deployment of resources. Why the Reformers did not regard mission as significant and when this shifted in the Protestant mindset are interesting historical questions on which more work is needed.[13] No doubt, the priority of reforming the church rather than extending its reach is part of the story. But the apparent absence of mission from the *notae* counts as a serious omission by many today. Is the church now to be defined in terms of mission, perhaps proceeding from the *missio Dei* as its ground? Or does this suffer too from the narrowing of purpose, form and activity that afflicted earlier approaches?[14]

Dismal Stories?

An underlying meta-narrative of the secular age is that we have now broken free from the irrational and damaging hold of religion upon our society. We have entered, so the narrative continues, a new age of liberation, peace, sexual freedom, and individual rights. I take this to be a historical story (as opposed to a philosophical or scientific claim) which underlies skepticism, new atheism, and a more diffused secular antipathy towards the church. The narrative features some shameful examples (the Crusades, the Inquisition, sectarianism, violence, burning of witches, and recent exposure of chronic child abuse—admittedly, these are not difficult to find) and tends to view these as indicative of the practical effects of Christian faith across the ages. Hence the triple claim that religion is irrational, damaging and inhibiting is supported by a historical story that we have now internalized as a culture. This has particular appeal in the secular west—the examples indeed are largely drawn from western history. Since the 1960s, the rapid process of secularization has confirmed the plausibility of this new meta-narrative for many of our fellow citizens. It enables critics to castigate Christian attitudes

12. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 71.

13. David J. Bosch points out that Anabaptist missions provided an exception. See *Transforming Mission,* 246.

14. For discussion of Reformed attitudes to mission, see Guder, "Reformed Theology, Mission and Ecumenism," 319–34.

as "medieval" and to view its rejection as accompanied by greater freedoms, the end of a cramping institutional authority, and life-enhancing practices.

I offer three types of response to this story of liberation from the dark ages of Christianity.

i) Repentance is required of the churches for previous abuses of faith and power. This is needed for the purification of memory and for the constant task of reformation in our own age. Humility is the first flower that grows at the foot of the cross. We should also acknowledge that the secular world may have much to teach us. In the past, the churches have often been too slow to appreciate the importance of democracy, the equality of the sexes, tolerance, the provision of legislation for divorce and remarriage, and human rights, even though resources within the tradition can be deployed to support these. Some forms of secularism offer a blanket condemnation of Christianity. But we should not repeat the same mistake by making a blanket judgement about secularism, as if its benefits must be entirely deleterious.

The representatives of any contemporary institution have a responsibility to reckon with its history. In belonging to the church, we position ourselves *a fortiori* in continuity with those who preceded us and invested in its practices and beliefs. Implicit in the belonging is a claim about institutional origins and standards, and our alignment with these. Edmund Burke famously stated that if an institution is worth preserving, we should be prepared to reform it. The converse also holds. If an institution is worth reforming, we must be ready to defend its preservation. This will involve a reckoning with the past and a readiness to admit its defects and lapses. The act of reforming should be accompanied by an appropriate acknowledgement of where we and our predecessors went wrong. That may involve apology and reparations to other groups or individuals who have been harmed, sometimes grievously, and honest historical excavation of the past, both remote and recent, and what was undertaken in the name of the institution. Repentance may take different forms, depending on time and circumstance, but it is a pre-requisite for the work of preservation and reform. Though its roots are medieval and catholic, the ancient slogan of *semper reformanda* is often associated with the Reformed churches. If we always need to be reformed, then we must stand in a dialectical relationship to the past in both interrogating its failings and lauding its achievements.[15]

15. For discussion of the slogan see Koffeman, "'Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda," 1–5.