

# A Theology of Church

Glenn N Davies

## Introduction

In the Foreword to *Mission-shaped Church (MSC)*, Archbishop Rowan Williams states:

we have begun to recognize that there are many ways in which the reality of ‘church’ can exist....what makes the situation interesting is that we are going to have to live with variety; the challenge is how to work with that variety so that everyone grows together in faith and in eagerness to learn about and spread the Good News. If ‘church’ is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other, there is plenty of theological room for diversity of rhythm and style, so long as we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart of every expression of Christian life in common.<sup>1</sup>

In a report about the mixed economy of neighbourhood and network churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury significantly acknowledges that the reality of church is multi-faceted in its expression. In other words, it is not only the geographically determined parochial model of church that is the only legitimate claimant to the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Williams cautiously provides a definition of church, as the encounter of people with the Risen Jesus, who are committed to deepen that engagement through their own encounter with each other. While not the Report’s working definition of the concept of ‘church’, Williams’ description provides a helpful entry point for understanding the nature of church in the light of church planting and other fresh expressions of church in the changing English context.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mission-shaped Church*, Church House Publishing, London 2004, p.vii.

<sup>2</sup> ‘A geographical approach alone is not sufficient. Parish, by itself, is no longer adequate as the Church of England’s missionary strategy. “One size fits all” will not do. A mutual partnership of parochial and network churches, using traditional and fresh approaches, and sharing ministry in larger areas is necessary.’ *MSC*, p.12.

One of the overriding concerns of the authors of *MSC*, is the importance of demonstrating to its readership that the so-called fresh expressions of church and the often non-territorial identities that result from church planting are *valid* expressions of church. The activity of church planting or church refreshing results in new churches, not merely a pale reflection of the true church, which is less than the full quid.<sup>3</sup> In this regard they followed the line of the previous report, *Breaking New Ground*,<sup>4</sup> whose definition of church in the context of church planting was:

Church...has been defined for the purposes of this report as: a group of Christians predominantly drawn from a discernible neighbourhood, culture or network, who are led by those with authorization from the wider church, whose worship and common life includes regular commitment to preaching the Word and to the celebration of the two dominical sacraments.<sup>5</sup>

However, the authors of *MSC* identified some deficiencies in this definition of church, specifically in terms of mission identity and practice. The missiological dimension was sorely missing.

Part of the paradigm shift since *Breaking New Ground* is the discovery that fresh expressions of church are not only legitimate expressions of church, but they may be more legitimate because they attend more closely to the mission task, and they are more deeply engaged in the local context, and follow more attentively the path of incarnation.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly *MSC* seeks to correct this imbalance with greater attention to the mission and incarnational character of church. While this is noteworthy in its aim, the thrust of

---

<sup>3</sup> ““Church” and “plant” both have a variety of meanings. But when the two are combined, they modify each other. *Breaking New Ground* rightly argued that the two words, “church” and “plant” should be used separately and not used as a new hybrid noun—a “churchplant”. It is important that what comes to birth is recognized as church and the verb ‘plant’ is allowed to indicate an organic process.’ *MSC*, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> *Breaking New Ground*, Church House Publishing, London, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> *Breaking New Ground*, para 2.1, cited by *MSC*, p.32

<sup>6</sup> *MSC*, p.23.

this essay is to evaluate this claim in the light of Scripture with a view to establishing a theology of church that reflects the Bible's teaching and is appropriate for the post-Christian era.

## Defining church

### 1. Church as assembly

The word 'church'<sup>7</sup> is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which was a common word used to describe an assembly of persons. It was not a religious word *per se*, but secular in its origin,<sup>8</sup> being the characteristic word used for the assembly of citizens of Greek city-states. Thus apart from Luke's use of the term with a specifically Christian denotation, he was also able to use it unambiguously and without qualification when describing the *ad hoc* assembly of citizens who gathered in Ephesus in opposition to Paul's teaching (Acts 10:32, 41). When qualified, it could also denote the legal assembly or proper town meeting (Acts 19:39).<sup>9</sup> The term *ekklēsia* bore no inherent relation to the nature of the meeting, other than to denote an assembly or gathering of persons for a purpose. This is well illustrated by Origen's qualified and unqualified use of the term *ekklēsia* (here translated 'church') in the third century.

The church of God, say at Athens, is meek and quiet since it desires to please God: the church of the Athenians is riotous and in no way comparable to the one of God there. You may say the same of the church of God at Corinth and the church of the people of Corinth and the church of God at Alexandria and the church of the people at Alexandria.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> The English word 'church' is derived from the Greek adjective *kyriakos*, meaning 'pertaining to the Lord'.

<sup>8</sup> *Ekklēsia* is the substantive form of the verb *ek-kaleo*, to call out, used to summon soldiers to assembly.

<sup>9</sup> English translations do not translate *ekklēsia* in these verses as 'church'. Tyndale is a rare exception in consistently translating *ekklēsia* as 'congregation' throughout the New Testament.

<sup>10</sup> *Contra Celsum* 3.29, 30, cited by D.B. Knox, "De-mythologizing the Church", *Selected Works*, Matthias Media, Kingsford, NSW, 2003, vol. II, pp.26-27 [originally published in *RTR* vol.32(1), 1973, pp.48-55].

Christians most likely adopted the word *ekklēsia* from the Greek translation of *qāhāl* in the Septuagint.<sup>11</sup> Peter O’Brien makes the following observation:

In the translation of the LXX the Greek word *ekklēsia* (‘assembly’) occurs about one hundred times, of which twenty-two are in the Apocrypha. It represents the Hebrew *qāhāl* (‘assembly’) some seventy-three times (but never *‘ēdāh*, ‘congregation’)...The Hebrew term *qāhāl* and its Greek equivalent *ekklēsia* could describe assemblies of a less specifically religious or nonreligious kind, for example, the gathering of an army in preparation for war (1 Sam 17:47; 2 Chron 28:14) or the ‘coming together’ of an unruly and potentially dangerous crowd (Ps 26 [LXX 25]:5; Eccles 26:5). However, particularly significant are those instances of *ekklēsia* (rendering *qāhāl*) which denote the congregation of Israel when it assembled to hear the Word of God on Mt Sinai, or later on Mt Zion where all Israel were required to assemble three times a year.<sup>12</sup>

The assembly of God’s people at Mt Sinai is described as the Day of Assembly (Deut 9:10; 18:16). It was a day that Israel was to remember forever: ‘Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me “Assemble<sup>13</sup> the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children”’ (Deut 4:10). Significantly, Luke refers

---

<sup>11</sup> I.H. Marshall, “New Wine in Old Wine Skins: V. The Biblical Use of the Word ‘Ekklēsia’”, *ET* vol.84, 1972-73, pp.359-64.

<sup>12</sup> P.T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Books, Dallas, 1982, pp.57-58. O’Brien cites the work of W.J. Dumbrell who argues that although *qāhāl* and *‘ēdāh* have the same basic meaning, the latter ‘represents the people as a national unit, whether assembled or not, while *qāhāl* represents the people summoned, convened or assembled for some special purpose.’ Similarly E.P. Clowney, *The Church*, IVP, Leicester, 1995, p.30: ‘Both *ekklēsia* and *qāhāl* denote an actual assembly, rather than a “congregation” (which may or may not be “congregated”).’ See also J.Y. Campbell, ‘The Origin and Meaning of the Christian Use of the word □□□□□□□□’, *JETS* vol.49, 1948, pp.130-142. Kevin Giles disputes the need to understand *ekklēsia* in the New Testament as requiring a continuing sense of ‘assembly’. He prefers the concept of ‘community’ as a more accurate translation. *What on Earth is the Church? A Biblical and Theological Enquiry*, SPCK, London, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Greek: *ekklēsiason*.

to this Day of Assembly as the church [*ekklēsia*] in the wilderness (Acts 7:38) when recording Stephen's speech concerning the history of God's promises to Israel and their collective encounter with the living God. It is within the context of God's redemptive work that God calls his people to himself.

## 2. Church in the New Testament

Jesus indicated that he would build his church, following Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Messiah (Matt 16:18). While there has been much debate about the exact meaning of 'this rock' upon which Jesus was to build his church, far less reflection has been given to the imagery of Israel's Day of Assembly, that significant expression of 'church' before the rock of Mt Sinai. Characteristically the reflection on this passage by D. Broughton Knox is insightful.

Just as Yahweh formed his church before himself at Sinai, having redeemed his people from Egypt and brought them to himself on eagles' wings, so, as a consequence of Peter's faith given to him by the heavenly Father, Jesus declares that he will build his church 'before this rock'.<sup>14</sup>

Knox argues that the Greek construction of *epi* plus the dative in Mathew 16:18 is more naturally translated as 'before this rock' or 'at this rock'. 'With verbs of motion, such as "build", *epi* takes, naturally, the accusative, as in the parable of the man who builds his house upon the rock, narrated by Matthew earlier in his Gospel.'<sup>15</sup> The close identification of God and the rock of Mt Sinai/Horeb ('I will stand before you by the rock of Horeb'—Ex 17:6) is now transcended by Christ the rock, from whom would flow living water (John 7:38).

The apostle Paul similarly captures this imagery when reminding the Corinthians of Israel's disobedience in the wilderness, despite their having been baptised into Moses and eaten spiritual food and drunk spiritual water from the rock—for that rock was Christ (1 Cor 10:1-5). Furthermore this warning comes to the Corinthians within the

---

<sup>14</sup> Knox, 'De-mythologizing the Church', p.24.

<sup>15</sup> Knox, 'De-mythologizing the Church', p.25.

context of Paul's instructions 'when they gather together as church' (11:18; cf 10:32; 11:16; 14:23).<sup>16</sup>

Similarly the writer to the Hebrews draws the analogy between the present experience of Christians and that of the Israelites journeying towards the Promised Land. Yet for Christians, while still journeying, have also arrived. As they are exhorted to continue 'meeting together' (10:25), they are encouraged to see that the eschatological future, the heavenly assembly, has become a present reality.

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to myriad of angels, to the church [*ekklēsia*] of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all people, to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-4)

Whereas for Israel, the Day of Assembly was the result of the redeeming act of God, so for Christians, their assembly is the fruit of the gospel, the redemption of God's people through the death and resurrection of Christ.

### 3. The Church of God in Christ

The above short summary indicates that the Greek word *ekklēsia* provided an excellent vehicle to express the importance of assembly as the way in which people are to meet with God in the face of Jesus Christ. The call of God is a call to come unto him (Matt 11:28) and where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is there among them (Matt 18:20). While this understanding of church is primarily local there is also a heavenly dimension. For Christians are also members of the heavenly gathering around Christ, seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6; cf Phil 3:20; Heb 12:22-4). While the New Testament does not articulate the relationship between the earthly and the heavenly church, it would appear that each earthly assembly of God's people meets

---

<sup>16</sup> For further evidence of the place of the desert assembly in Paul's thought, see L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St Paul*, ET, Herder & Herder, New York, 1959, pp.113-117.

with Christ, and is a manifestation of the heavenly reality.<sup>17</sup> It is not so much that a particular local church is part of the church – it is the church, reflecting as it does the heavenly assembly of the firstborn.<sup>18</sup> Most likely it is for this reason that Paul argues for proper decorum in the earthly assembly because the angels are truly present (1 Cor 11:10).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this is consistent with the New Testament descriptions of local assemblies: ‘the church of God in Corinth’; the whole church in Gaius’ house; or the church of the Thessalonians. It is also consistent with the plural uses of the word church: the churches in Galatia; the churches of the Gentiles; or the seven churches of Asia Minor.

We may conclude, therefore, that the church of God in Christ is the assembly of Christians who gather in the presence of the Risen Jesus to hear his word and to be mutually encouraged by so doing as they look forward to the realisation of the heavenly assembly to which they already belong. In other words, it is the gospel of God that draws people to himself through his Son. It is his living word, the word of the gospel, that redeems them from their sins and makes them citizens of heaven. In the words of Hebrews 10:22-5.

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

---

<sup>17</sup> For the development of this theme see P.T. O’Brien, ‘The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity’, *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D.A. Carson, (Exeter/Grand Rapids, Paternoster/Baker, 1987, pp.88-119.

<sup>18</sup> ‘the expression denotes the whole communion of the saints including those “militant here on earth”.’ O’Brien, ‘The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity’, p.96.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly there are allusions to the connections between the earthly and heavenly assemblies in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 33:2 Yahweh is represented as coming to Sinai, Seir and Paran from (or with) ten thousands of holy ones in the context of the assembly of the tribes of Israel (33:5). Psalm 68 also mentions the heavenly hosts in connection with Sinai.

## Defining a mission-shaped church

Our study thus far supports Rowan Williams' definition of 'church' from the Foreword to *MSC*.<sup>20</sup> He identifies three elements of church: (1) a Christ-centered encounter of people and the Risen Jesus, (2) in relationship with Christ and each other, (3) who are committed to grow together in their engagement with Christ. Each of these reflects the biblical principles that we have outlined above. Furthermore the definition of church, provided by *Breaking New Ground*, and partially endorsed by *MSC*, also reflects the basic pattern of the biblical teaching.

Church...has been defined for the purposes of this report as: a group of Christians predominantly drawn from a discernible neighbourhood, culture or network, who are led by those with authorization from the wider church, whose worship and common life includes regular commitment to preaching the Word and to the celebration of the two dominical sacraments.<sup>21</sup>

Admittedly, their definition is more detailed than Williams' and one could debate the necessity of including some aspects. For example, while a church is normally drawn from a discernible neighbourhood, culture or network, this is more an observation of the nature of church than a definitional component. The commitment to the celebration of the dominical sacraments, while itself a matter of detail, is clearly supported by Jesus' commands to baptise disciples and participate in the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him.<sup>22</sup> However, the question of authorisation from the wider church sounds more like an Anglican intrusion into the definition of church, than one which receives biblical support. One wonders whether the Ethiopian eunuch was depending upon the tacit authorisation from the church in Jerusalem (through Philip?) before he returned home to spread the gospel. Similarly, Paul appears to be little concerned with the authorisation of those who first proclaimed the gospel in Rome. He was not interested in building

---

<sup>20</sup> *MSC*, vii, as cited above, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> *Breaking New Ground*, para 2.1, cited by *MSC*, p.32

<sup>22</sup> 'The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordnance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.' Article XIX.

upon another's foundation but keen to find greenfield sites for his gospel proclamation (Rom 15:20). In a similar vein, the unauthorised preaching of some who preach Christ out of selfish ambition (Phil 1:17) still causes Paul to rejoice that Christ is preached. One is reminded of the endorsement of a former Primate of Australia in 1964:

In these days Anglicanism has become aware in a new way that it has a world-wide mission, not to preserve itself but to give itself, and if necessary to lose itself, in the service of others. At the 1963 Toronto Congress, the Archbishop of Canterbury admonished Anglicans that 'the church that lives to itself will die by itself', and Bishop Stephen Bayne insisted that the end of Anglican missionary strategy was not that there should be more Anglicans but that the Church of Jesus Christ should be planted in every place.<sup>23</sup>

However, the authors of MSC consider the above definition to be 'weak on the nature, design and purpose of church'.<sup>24</sup> Their chapter on the theology of a missionary church seeks to remedy these perceived weaknesses.

One of the most significant weaknesses identified is the lack of attention to the church as incarnational. Since Dr Peter Adam has already addressed this issue in his paper elsewhere in this volume, suffice it to say that the concept of the church being incarnational is well-meaning but mistaken. A far better term to describe the apostolic principle of being all things to all people (1 Cor 9:19-23) is that of accommodation. Admittedly the word accommodation can also be used in a pejorative way, whereby the gospel is compromised in order to satisfy some cultural norm which is contrary to God's word. However, the use of accommodation being suggested is more akin to finding the appropriate cultural context and vocabulary for the gospel to be understood by the cultural group being addressed. Paul's approach to Jews was different from his approach to Gentiles, since accommodation to Jewish dietary laws was unnecessary for

---

<sup>23</sup> Archbishop Hugh Gough, Foreword to the Christian Foundations Series of books, ed. P.E. Hughes, Hodder & Stoughton, London, vols 1-10, 1964-65.

<sup>24</sup> *MSC*, 33.

the latter group.<sup>25</sup> Bible translators similarly need to accommodate (= translate) the words of Scripture to the language and thought forms of cultural groups different from their own.

The doctrine of the incarnation, however, refers to a unique event in the life of the Son of God. It is not repeatable. Moreover, while Jesus shares our common humanity, he also came to earth in a specific cultural context as a Jewish man. His ministry was not to Gentiles (Matt 15:24) and he forbade his disciples to enter Gentile villages (Matt 10:6). It was only after his resurrection that his command to make disciples was widened to include all nations. For the gospel has a redemptive-historical order: to the Jew first and also the Greek (Rom 1:16). However, the death and resurrection of Jesus ushered in a new day, and internationalisation of the people of God overcame the division between Jew and Gentile. Thus the blessing of Abraham comes to all nations, through the seed of Abraham (Matt 28:18-20; Gal 3:14, 28-9).

A modern day equivalent of such accommodation is the recognition that Australians do not have to become 16<sup>th</sup> century anglophiles to be saved—nor do they need to become Anglicans! One is reminded of early English missionaries in India introducing ‘white bread’ for celebrations of the Lord’s Supper—a far cry from both the bread of first century Israel and the local Indian variety. This lack of accommodation taught Indian Christians that the ‘bread of life’ could only be white English bread.

While the emphasis of *MSC* is absolutely right in its endeavour to shake the cobwebs out of the traditional forms of church and to meet people where they are, this is not incarnation, but accommodation. As the authors indicate elsewhere, ‘No serious attempt at inculturation by the Church of England can begin with a fixed view of the outward form of the local church.’<sup>26</sup> Such accommodation to the various subcultures of today’s society that the church encounters will require radical rethinking of the relevancy of forms of liturgy, the appropriateness of sixteenth century (if not medieval) forms of clerical attire and the suitability of outmoded forms of music. None of these are essential to the gospel nor essential to the nature of church, as the gathering of Christians around the Risen Jesus listening to his word and obeying his commands.

---

<sup>25</sup> Compare Luke’s differing presentation of Paul’s gospel preaching to Jewish audiences as opposed to Gentile audiences in Acts.

<sup>26</sup> *MSC*, p.91.

Another theological confusion of categories is the rhetoric of the Nicene marks of the church as demonstrating the church's missionary vocation. Thus unity is called upon to promote mission, because the 'church is one through baptism, which is an integral dimension of mission.'<sup>27</sup> Yet unity is the gift of the Spirit (Eph 4:3): it speaks of that which we have in common. Baptism is the fruit of mission, the response to the gospel in faith and repentance, not its equivalent. Unity does not promote mission *per se*, though it is clearly consistent with it in that those who are brought to Christ join the one church, which is Christ's body.

Holiness is also enlisted to support the mission focus. 'A Church that is separate, even distinctive, but not involved in the mission of its Lord, cannot claim to be holy.'<sup>28</sup> Since the very concept of holiness is being separate, dedicated to God and distinct from the world, it is hard to see how the authors of the Nicene Creed would have specifically had mission in mind when describing the church as holy. That holiness includes obedience to Christ's commands, which includes the preaching of the gospel throughout the world, demonstrates the consistency of mission with holiness, not its *sine qua non*.

'Catholicity', claim the authors, 'provides the challenge to the local church or churches for diversity within mission. It is an invitation to church planting and fresh expressions of church.'<sup>29</sup> Again, one wonders from what historical foundation such a claim is derived. Catholicity was a deterrent to heresy, by highlighting the consistency and 'wholeness' of the church's practices both spatially and temporally in the face of heretical views. That it bespoke the imperative to mission seems hard to justify.

Finally apostolicity is claimed as 'the mark that continually presses the Church to engage culture with the gospel.'<sup>30</sup> Yet the heart of apostolicity is conformity to the teaching of the apostles. The apostles are the 'sent ones' with the authority of the Jesus and the prayer of Jesus that they will enable others to believe 'through their word' (John 17:20). The adjective 'apostolic' does not appear in the New Testament, whereas the

---

<sup>27</sup> MSC, p.96.

<sup>28</sup> MSC, p.97.

<sup>29</sup> MSC, p.97.

<sup>30</sup> MSC, p.98.

noun 'apostle' is frequently used in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles. However, the closest use of the term apostle with reference to the church is Ephesians 2:20, where Paul states that the church 'is built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets'. The importance of these foundation-laying gifts is to anchor the church to Christ Jesus, the cornerstone, and to his teaching. Other gifts, such as evangelists (Eph 4:11), strongly suggest that it is not the church that is sent into the world, rather it is the gospel that is sent into all the world through the agency of gifted people, sent by the church (Acts 13:1-3). As Paul reminds the Corinthians:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor 12:27-30)

Clearly not all members have the task of mission as their spiritual gift. Some have word gifts, others have gifts of service. All gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor 12:7), for edification of the saints (1 Cor 14:26) and for the glory to God (1 Cor 11:31).

While the premise of the book is that the church of God ought to be mission-shaped, the term is ambiguous. As the fruit of mission, its shape has clearly been determined by mission—or rather, determined by the gospel. However, it is not mission-shaped in terms of its purpose. This was not evident in the meaning of the word in either the Old or New Testaments. That the church is mission-minded is not the same as saying it is mission-shaped.

A more accurate description would be to describe the church as gospel-shaped and mission-minded. Its very nature is the assembly of the redeemed. The goal of mission is the assembled throng of the redeemed from every tribe and nation giving praise and honour to God and to the Lamb (Rev 5:11-14). The eschatological assembly will not be mission-shaped (in terms of purpose) in the new heavens and new earth, but it will be gospel-shaped for ever and ever, even when it no longer remains mission-minded.

Paul speaks of the eschatological significance of the church when he states that the Father has put all things under the feet of Christ and made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22-3). This is the final destiny of the church, the assembled throng around the throne. Yet that day will only come through the preaching of Christ and his gospel to all the world. As the church reflects the teaching of Christ in its assembly it will draw people to itself, who by the Spirit of God will declare that 'God is among you' (1 Cor 14:25), yet it must also continually send gifted Christians out into all the world to proclaim that saving gospel in fulfilment of Jesus' command.