

The Church: Towards a Common Vision

A Believers Church Response

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Thank you for inviting me to give a short contribution to this important debate from what I call a Believers Church perspective. To put it short, this is the perspective from the so-called third stream or third type, which exists under different names like free church, gathered or gathering church, congregationalism, pentecostal (with a small 'p', Newbigin, 1953)¹ or baptistic (James McClendon)². He talks about convictional, intentional communities, its roots going mainly back to the Anabaptists in the 16th and the Baptists in the 17th century, looking at the church first and primarily as a community of believers who – to use old and famous words from 1607 – 'covenant with God and with one another to walk in his ways, known and to be made known unto us, according to our best endeavours, whatsoever it shall cost us, the Lord assisting us'.³

The word itself – Believers Church – was as far as we know for the first time used by Max Weber in 1904 in the first edition of his *Der protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.⁴ Here he introduced this (English) term 'Believers Church', defining it 'solely as a community of personal believers of the reborn, and only these'.⁵ So if it comes to the question 'by what is the church constituted' the Believers Church Tradition (BCT) answers 'by the gathering of believers'. And every other question – about the sacraments, the office, church order or whatsoever - comes after that, is principally a secondary question.

Well, from that background, I want to make a few remarks, that hopefully will stimulate the debate and add some valuable thoughts to it.

The start with God's Mission/Missio Dei is a very stimulating and I think biblical one. When in the Introduction it says 'the church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission' (p. 3), the document is very close to the root and heart of the ecumenical movement, in accordance with Jesus' prayer in John 17, mentioned already in line 5 of the introduction. Being an apostolic church *is* being a missionary church.

So I think this is a very important start. But if this is the main focus of this document and of 'our understanding of the nature of the Church itself' (Introduction, p. 2), then I do have a few questions:

1. Is it expedient to still put so much emphasis on the sacraments and the office? Will that really advance our missionary force? Especially the eucharist is given an emphasis that seems to stand at odds with the New Testament and *casu quo* the empowerment of the church's witness. Theologically I wonder where the biblical grounding can be found to name the eucharist 'the most eloquent expression of the visible unity of the Church' (Introduction, p. 2), and practically I wonder how the celebration of the eucharist by Christians in a church building empowers the church' witness to the world and how it brings 'a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses' (par. 43). To be honest, I do not see the connection.

It looks more like a presumption, that subsequently is even read into the Great Commission, where it's purpose is summarized as 'to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1953).

² James Wm. McClendon jr., *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: Ethics* (Nashville 1986, 2002), chapter 1, *Vol. 2 Doctrine* (Nashville 1994), 332-345.

³ The covenant used in Gainsborough, where John Smyth (the later 'first Baptist') gathered different separated churches from the region, where after a day of fasting and prayer 'those whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeale for his trueth, they shooke of this yoake of antichristian bondage, and as the Lord's free people, joined them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walke in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them'. Source: W.T. Davis, *Bradford's history of Plymouth plantation* (New York: 1952²), 31.

⁴ Originally published as *Der protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* in [Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik](#), Bd. XX, Heft 1, S. 1-54 und Bd. XXI, Heft 1, S. 1-110 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1904-05).

⁵ 'eine Gemeinschaft der persönlich Gläubigen und Wiedergeborenen rund nur dieser'.

Word, baptizing *and celebrating the Lord's Supper*, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded' (par. 2, my italics). But Matthew 28 does not speak about the Lord's Supper at all...

When talking about the ministry, it comes back in a similar way. Look how the later developments in church history – apostolic succession, episcopate, eucharist - are read here into (again) Matthew 28: 'Having received from his Father "full authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18), Jesus shared his authority with the apostles (cf. John 20:22). Their successors in the ministry of oversight (episkopé) exercised authority in the proclamation of the gospel, *in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the eucharist* (neither mentioned in Matt. 28, nor in John 20!, my italics), and in the pastoral guidance of believers' (par. 48). It seems to me that the emphasis on the sacraments, and on the eucharist in particular, is not the fruit of biblical study, let alone of missional thinking, but more the result of certain traditions viewing the Bible and the missionary mandate through the lenses of their own prioritizing.

2. My second question comes her on: doesn't this document breathe still too much the climate of Christendom instead of post-Christendom? If we keep using the paradigm of Christendom in a post-Christendom situation, are we not then putting the cart before the horse? Could it be that at least parts of the ecumenical movement is still mourning the loss of Christendom and trying to (re)establish it, instead of looking at it as an opportunity for the church to (re)discover itself? The move of the church, as Stuart Murray describes it in his classic *Post-Christendom*, from the centre to the margins, from majority to minority, from settlers to sojourners, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission and from institution to movement, could and I think should be more discounted in a document like this.⁶

3. With my third question I return to the important question regarding our understanding of the nature of the Church. To quote Frank Littell: "'Believers' Church" does not mean that the church belongs to the members; it means that the members belong to Christ, so the church consists of those who are personally claimed by Christ, and without that relationship there is no church, however impressive the outward show'.⁷ Can we think about what we would gain if we consequently would start our thinking about the church with believers gathering in Jesus name and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit being led in whatever direction and on whatever mission?! I know it's more adventure and less certainty, but isn't that exactly what a missionary *movement* looks like?

This would bring us closer to what Volf calls a participative ecclesiology that takes more seriously probably than ever before, not only the priesthood of all believers, but also the prophethood and the kingship of all believers, an ecclesiology in which each member, being a 'minister' by his/her baptism, contributes to the edification, the worship and the mission of the church according to the *charismata* that the Spirit bestows on whom he wants.⁸

In a preparatory document for the inaugural meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948, Karl Barth wrote: 'It is obvious that the last remnants of sovereign authority in the idea of a *corpus christianum* are disappearing; this suggests that we should now look in this other (Congregationalist) direction'.⁹

A lot has happened since (think of the work of for example Littell, Garrett, Williams, Newbigin, Küng, Moltmann, Yoder, McClendon, Hauerwas, Volf and many others) and Volf might be right that 'today's global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a Free

⁶ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 20. See also Joshua T. Searle, "Moving Towards an Ecumenism of *Koinonia*: A Critical Response to 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision' from a Baptist Perspective" in *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 15.2 (2015), 17-27, whose article helped me to sharpen my first two questions.

⁷ F.H. Littell, 'The Concept of the Believers' Church', in: James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1969), 28.

⁸ 1 Cor. 12:7.

⁹ Karl Barth, 'The Church – the Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ' in *Man's Disorder and God's Design, The Amsterdam Assembly Series*, Vol. 1, New York 1948, 76. The correct English (nowadays?) is 'into', this is why I use 'into' in my subtitle and from now on in the text.

Christian form' and that 'we are standing in the middle of a clear and irreversible "process of congregationalization" of all Christianity'.¹⁰

I would propose that a document as 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision' would at least take this process more seriously and reflect on it more thoroughly than it has done now, for its own good and for the enhancement of God's Mission in the world today.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 13.