

School of Divinity

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P03514. – Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics

Unity in Diversity

In his work, *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth has much to say on the subject of church unity, even going so far as to say that church disunity is a scandal.¹ Disunity of the church, he suggests, is symptomatic of its imperfection; the early church did not begin in this fragmentary way. Furthermore, attempting to justify diversity as “a development of the riches of the grace given to man in Jesus Christ” is also utterly unjustifiable. Nor is it possible to see this criticism purely with reference to disunity in a very broad sense – the churches of East and West, or even Roman Catholic and Protestant (or Evangelical as Barth terms it). Barth’s criticism flows right down into denominational divisions and, although not stated explicitly, would extend to divisions within denominations.

At its face value, such criticism would appear to stand against any possibility of allowing different expressions of ‘church’ as is commonly found, and is indeed being promoted, within many denominations in our contemporary faith community. In the last twenty years, the Church of England has been exploring the “contribution of ‘new forms of church’ in its ongoing mission”.² A report in 2004³ identified the need to find expressions of church which were contemporarily relevant and engaging. The result was the *Fresh Expressions* movement within that denomination. Even more recently, similar mission-oriented initiatives have been promoted within the Church of Scotland. Many of these initiatives fall under the umbrella term of ‘Emerging Church’. The varying facets and presentations of this movement will be considered later in the essay.

This essay seeks to explore whether these ‘fresh expressions’ of church life represent a scandalous disunity so roundly condemned by Barth or whether their diversity remains acceptably

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956), 678.

² Ian Mobsby, *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church*, 2nd ed. (Moot Community Publishing, 2008), 7.

³ This was the Church of England report, *A Mission-shaped Church Report*.

within the 'riches of grace' bestowed upon the church. This essay forms part of the preliminary research work into a broader assessment of the theology found within the Emerging Church movement. As such its focus is relatively broad, concerned more with the bigger issues at stake than specific theological points.

Our starting point is with Barth's understanding of the unity of the church. For Barth, unity is not an issue of desire or uniformity of style but comes straight from the creedal statement "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church"⁴; often referred to as the four marks of the Church. This is a statement of faith, of belief. As such, it brings an added dimension to the issue of church unity. Unity ceases to be an issue of the visible church – that which can be seen, experienced, assessed and judged – but also encompasses that aspect of church which is 'mystery' or invisible – the spiritual aspect 'discernible' or understood only through faith. Kimlyn Bender's assessment is that "Barth sees unity as grounded in a proper recognition and attention to the church as a mystery, a visible manifestation of an invisible call of the Lord through the Spirit."⁵ However, it must be noted that church "as a mystery" does not mean that the visible, temporal church is unimportant, for it is there that the "scandal" of disunity is apparent. Neither must the mystery aspect of church be over-emphasised, allowing an 'anything goes' attitude to temporal and physical expressions of the visible church. They cannot be excused by reference to unity being exclusively an issue of faith or spirituality. Barth remains solidly Christological in this respect:

"Visible unity exists simply as a witness and correspondence to the unity of the church's one Lord, and therefore comes into existence only as the churches focus not upon unity for its own sake but instead dedicate themselves to listening to their one Lord."⁶

Standing at the heart of church unity is Barth's insistence that 'Church' is, first and foremost, a call into community. "The Church is a community which hastens towards and comes together in a public convocation"⁷

We must be careful, however, to avoid confusing the earthly, temporal, gathered community with 'the Church'. More particularly, we must not confuse any specific expression of that earthly

⁴ Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381CE

⁵ Kimlyn J Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, Barth studies (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 184.

⁶ Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 184.

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 652.

and temporal expression of ‘the Church’ with ‘**the** Church’. “No concrete form of the community can in itself and as such be the object of faith.”⁸

In the same way, it is necessary to guard against following secular trends which have only the temporal dimension in mind.

“Without this special visibility all that can be seen is the men united in it and their common activity, and this will be explained in terms of the categories which are regarded as the most appropriate for the understanding and appraisal of common human activities, with an attempt to subordinate it to some picture of the world and of history.”⁹

In other words, when viewed ‘externally’, and without this ‘invisible’ dimension taken into account, all that will be seen of the community is a gathering which will be evaluated in the same terms as any other secular gathering. The Church will be seen as a club or organisation like any other. This is especially pertinent when we consider the various expressions we find of ‘Emerging Church’.

Without this critical eye then all activities are evaluated in the light of all other community gatherings or activities. The duty of any expression of Church must therefore be to witness to God:

“Even in its visibility it can and should attest its invisible glory, i.e., the glory of the Lord justifying man and of man justified by the Lord. But it loses the ability to do this, it becomes unserviceable to the will and act of God, the extent that in its visible being it wants to be something more and better than the witness of its invisible being, if it content or indeed insists on representing and maintaining and asserting and communicating itself as a historical factor, taking itself and its doctrine and sacraments and sacramental observances and ordinances and spiritual authority and power in the more usual sense of the word to be the meaning of its existence, its greatness, its true and final word, in place of the underlying and overruling power of Jesus Christ and His Spirit.”¹⁰

Such a warning is applicable both to the established, institutional churches who would consider any break from the traditions and practices of their particular denomination to be suspect, but also to those groups who would split from such established tradition. For the former, the simple fact of its historical precedence is not, in itself, adequate justification for its assertion of being ‘the

⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 659.

⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 656.

¹⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 657.

Church'. However, emerging expressions of Church must also question both their motives and intentions in establishing alternative worship practices.

It is now largely to that second group that we turn as this essay explores some of the purposes and implementations of these fresh expressions of the church community. In so doing, their purposes and practices will be assessed, primarily against Barth's understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ, taking into account both the temporal and 'mysterious' dimensions of Church.

It would be useful at this point to tighten up some definitions. 'Emerging Church' has become an umbrella term for a very broad approach to exploring new and alternative understandings of how to be a church community and how best to express faith within a particular cultural context. One useful explanation of the broad scope of this term comes from an online guide intended to support those who would wish to examine what *Fresh Expressions* is about:

There are at least three groups within the 'emerging church' family:

- ***Those who think and write about Christianity and our changing culture.***
They are wrestling with the challenges presented to the Christian faith by 'post-modern' thought and behaviour. How can the gospel connect with today's world? What might be the implications for church?
- ***Those exploring new forms of church mainly with people who still go to church*** (but who are often about to leave). Typically they are into alternative forms of worship and authentic community. Many have a missional heart, but their starting point is to work with Christians who are dissatisfied with existing church.
- ***Those exploring new forms of church mainly for or with people who don't attend church.*** Some of these innovative forms of church have a fruitful track record, but others are small, young and fragile. Though not everyone would use the term, we would describe these communities as 'fresh expressions of church'.¹¹

¹¹ "Share the Guide | What is a fresh expression of church?," <http://www.sharetheguide.org/section1/1>.

The first can be disregarded for the purposes of this discussion as it represents individuals who seek to assess and critique church and its engagement with contemporary society. The second is of interest because it involves the potential for breaking away from the established church. Although there are dangers inherent in this movement, it is likely that the very fact of emergence from an established tradition will act as a corrective to wholesale rejection of the historical past and, therefore, the understanding of its place within the broader context of the Church. It is in the third category that there lies the greatest possibility to consider the issue of unity, certainly within the confines of this essay. A particular danger lurks in the apparent disconnection from the established church; that of no call 'into' community other than into their own. It is this last category which has given rise to the *Fresh Expressions* initiative within the Church of England allied with the Methodist Church and it is to this we turn to consider its place within the broad scope of the Church.

Fresh Expressions is, first and foremost, focused on mission. Its primary purpose is outreach. However, unlike many missions of the past, its main purpose is not to attract people into the established worshipping community. Rather, it is "a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them."¹² In particular the church plant is contextually sympathetic. "The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere."¹³ This idea of planting a new church, as opposed to an extension of an existing one, is crucial to the understanding of *Fresh Expressions*. "A fresh expression is a church plant or a new congregation. It is not a new way to reach people and add them to an existing congregation. It is not an old outreach with a new name ('rebranded' or 'freshened up'). Nor is it a half-way house, a bridge project, which people belong to for a while, on their way into Christian faith, before crossing over to 'proper' church. This is proper church!"¹⁴

It is this last assertion which is of particular relevance to our considerations in this essay. It begs the question of what 'proper church' means and whether particular fresh expressions of it fall within the scope of the definition. Once again, this is an enormous area for investigation and so the focus

¹² "An introduction by Graham Cray | Fresh Expressions," <http://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/introduction>.

¹³ "An introduction by Graham Cray | Fresh Expressions."

¹⁴ "An introduction by Graham Cray | Fresh Expressions."

will be on the issue of unity. There is no doubt over the community focus of *Fresh Expressions* churches. One might argue that that is their very underpinning; to be relevant to the community they are established in, they will naturally reflect the make-up of that community. The danger however, as has been previously alluded to, is that in establishing a new community, none of the 'old' community is considered relevant and so is disconnected from entirely. The great risk is that all sense of belonging to a broader movement is lost. Barth does allow, however, for this mission-style outreach work which emerging churches, in all their guises, seek to achieve. He appears to acknowledge that allowing only the institutional church to be the expression of faith is just as absurd as disconnecting from it.

For the same reason we cannot try to realise the credo unam ecclesiam [I believe one church] externally in abstracto. Self-evidently this cannot be done by a cogite intrare [‘compelling them to come in’], by any political or social pressure exercised by one Church or group on Churches on another.¹⁵

Dr. Peter Rollins, co-ordinator of Ikon, an emerging church in Belfast, would argue that it is no bad thing to avoid the compulsion to be part of the institutional Church. Indeed, he takes issue with new churches finding their expression within the established, institutional church structures. His argument is that there is an inherent danger in so doing and that “in the very process of [allowing a fresh expression of church] the radical voice of these groups is actually suppressed.”¹⁶ He further argues that “the fact remains that the framework that the institutional church affirms is one that cannot be embraced by many of these emerging groups without them losing something substantive about their message (primarily its universal scope).”¹⁷ Ikon is, perhaps, one of the more extreme examples of an emerging church casting aside tradition. Their website describes them as:

Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformance art. Challenging the distinction between theist and atheist, faith and no faith our main gathering employs a cocktail of live music,

¹⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 679.

¹⁶ Peter Rollins, “Biting the hand that feeds,” in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church*, ed. Martyn Percy and Louise Nelstrop (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), 72.

¹⁷ Rollins, “Biting the hand that feeds,” 75.

visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection in an attempt to open up the possibility of a theodramatic event.¹⁸

Their strong use of imagery and symbolism as part of their worship event is, in part, driven by their understanding of icons. Rollins, in his book *How (not) to Speak of God*, defines an icon as follows:

To treat something as an icon is to view particular words, images or experiences as aids in contemplation of that which cannot be reduced to words, images or experience. Not only this, but the icon represents a place where God touches humanity. Consequently, icons are not only a place where we contemplate God; they also act as the place that God uses in order to communicate with us.¹⁹

In the latter part of this book Rollins offers examples of Ikon services. It is evident that the focus is on experience, visual imagery and shared personal reflections. In one service²⁰ a Bible is used as a prop. It is not read from and is mentioned only in passing; it is used to provide a dramatic interlude as it is slammed shut. It has been 'reduced' to an object to aid contemplation. This seems to be an instance where emergence from institutional forms of church has resulted in a complete fracture. However, it would perhaps be disingenuous to read from this that there is a complete separation from identity with the Church as a whole. One point behind the symbolic ignoring of the Bible is that, so often, that is precisely what many believers do. It would also be unfair to suggest that this is typical of the worship experience at an emerging church. Rather, it represents an extreme example of how much of institutional practice can be set aside. Nevertheless, it remains open to the criticism that such practices step too far beyond the boundaries of 'Church', especially if a church is established in isolation from tradition and historical precedent. The calling into community, in the broader sense, acts as a corrective (or ought to).

This raises two questions in particular for us to consider, especially in the light of our earlier reflection on Barth's ecclesiology. The questions are strongly linked and may indeed represent two sides of the same coin. The first is whether the institutional church is guilty of attempting to hold on to too many of its procedures and practices. Has it fallen into the trap of assuming that its temporal

¹⁸ "Main Page - Ikon," http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Main_Page.

¹⁹ Peter Rollins, *How (not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 38.

²⁰ Rollins, *How (not) to Speak of God*, 77. Service 1, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?', is a reflection on the crucifixion. It is a modern interpretation of a Tenebrae service. Other services do have scripture read but almost as if 'in passing'. The main content is contemporary stories, poems and drama.

structures are its defining characteristic? The second is whether the emerging church (or at least particular expressions of it) has become too much like any other secular organisation, pandering only to the desires and expectations of its members. However, we can perhaps agree that, at either extreme, neither expression of Church could be considered to be a proper and appropriate expression of the Church. In both cases, the church has become too concerned with its temporal existence, arguably to the exclusion, or at least the detriment, of its spiritual dimension. Yet when each pulls back from either extreme, there is the possibility of unity. Yet again though, we are challenged by Barth that, in drawing away from these extremes, unity only comes when the spiritual dimension is brought back into play.

In *Total Church*, Tim Chester and Steve Timmis describe some of the motives behind the arrival of people at the emerging church movement – The Crowded House – which they are involved in:

In The Crowded House we have also found some people wanting to be part of our church community not initially because they were interested in Christ, but because they wanted a kinder, gentler alternative to their existing network of relationships.²¹

Barth's warning, which we considered earlier, against allowing the 'external' view of the Church to be dictated exclusively by its temporal appearance seems pertinent at this point. However, it may also be suggested that the very appearance which is so attractive could be the result of the church paying attention to its spiritual dimension. Its very distinctiveness may be a manifestation of the second creedal mark of the Church – holiness. Unfortunately, this too is beyond the scope of this essay but may be a fruitful area for further investigation as it does impact on unity – churches may be distinctive in many different ways, yet all may be considered part of the one Church.

Selective examples such as Ikon and The Crowded House throw up as many questions as answers. Their apparent slide towards secular acceptance or departure from institutional practice cause us to question whether they have overstepped some notional mark and have therefore broken with the unity of the Church. It would be tempting to suggest that removing all consideration of earthly, temporal practice would benefit the discussion as, ultimately, the Church's confession of

²¹ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 40.

Jesus Christ as Lord which is the uniting factor. However, Barth does not allow this ‘escape clause’.

“One thing is certain – this credo [I believe one church] cannot consist of a movement of escape up or on from the visibility of the divided Church to the unity of an invisible Church.”²² The one cannot exist without the other. Both temporal and spiritual must be present, themselves a necessary unity. This unity, which extends indeed from the individual believer, is at the core of Barth’s theology as it represents nothing less than the reconciliation of man to God. “The subjective realization of reconciliation takes place in a two-fold form: in a collective form in the gathering, upbuilding and sending of the community and in an individual form in the faith, love and hope of individual Christians.”²³

It is clear that Barth’s robust ecclesiology is a challenge to all aspects of the Emerging Church movement and it is particularly relevant to those churches which are being established outwith the usual institutional Church structures. However, it is also clear from Barth’s understanding of the unity of the Church that there is still considerable leeway when considering whether a fresh expression of Church may be part of that unity. The challenge though is for these new faith communities to see themselves as truly part of one Church. This must go beyond simple co-operation with others. “What is demanded is the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, not the externally satisfying co-existence and co-operation of different religious societies.”²⁴ It is not enough to exist as separated communities who tolerate or even support and encourage one another but whose desire is only to retain their distinctiveness. Unity at its heart needs to be the confession that all are ‘one Church’. That means acknowledging that there can be unity in diversity.

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 678.

²³ Colm O’Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 242.

²⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 679.

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