

# **After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins**

**An Anabaptist Mennonite Network study course**

# **Introduction**

## **After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins**

“After Christendom: following Jesus on the margins” is one of a number of short courses that have been developed by the UK Anabaptist Mennonite Network. The network is not a denomination or institution but a resource agency, offering fresh insights from the radical Christian tradition on discipleship, church life and mission.

In the UK and many other nations, Christians are facing the challenges and opportunities of following Jesus in a changing culture and churches are coming to terms with being on the margins rather than at the centre. Things look different from the margins!

In Europe the church has been at the centre of society for so long that we need help to look at things differently. One source of inspiration and guidance for churches on the margins are earlier marginal Christian groups, such as the Anabaptist movement, which for nearly 500 years has been exploring discipleship, lifestyle, mission and church life from the margins.

Growing numbers of Christians and churches (from many denominations) are drawing on the Anabaptist tradition and looking to the Anabaptist Mennonite Network for resources. As well as running conferences and study groups and publishing *Anabaptism Today*, the network has developed some short courses.

Other courses now available are:

- Taking Jesus Seriously
- Becoming a Peace Church

## Explaining the notes

The notes for each session contain a mixture of resources – passages from the Bible to read, stories and insights from the Anabaptist tradition, questions to think about and practical exercises.

They can be used on your own, although they are designed for group study. There is quite a lot of information in the notes themselves and some extra reading and resources to go with them. You may decide to work through the whole of this or to use just some parts of the material provided. Some of the sessions can be split into sections and done in two or more sittings.

A number of symbols are used to indicate what is coming next:



This symbol means that there is something to read – either quietly on your own or as part of the group.



This symbol means that there is something to think about on your own or discuss with others.



This symbol means that the Anabaptist movement (or sometimes another radical group) has something to offer on this subject. Sometimes Anabaptist writers will be quoted; in other places Anabaptist ideas will be encountered.

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## Session 1: The Rise and Fall of Christendom

### Introduction

In order to understand the challenges and opportunities the church faces at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to travel back in time to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and trace the story of how the church came in from the margins to the centre of society. We need to examine the system known as “Christendom” by which the church became powerful, wealthy and able to impose its beliefs on almost everyone in Europe.

1600 years later, the church has lost this dominant position and finds itself again on the margins of society. Is this a disaster? Has the church lost its way? Or is this perhaps where the church was meant to be all along? Was what happened in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the problem? The Anabaptists and many other radical movements were sure the church took a wrong turning at that point.

In this course we will look at the Christendom years and the impact this system had on the church and its mission. Then we will be in a better position to think about how we respond to the end of Christendom. How might a church on the margins operate?

### The rise of Christendom

In the early years of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Empire was in turmoil. After centuries of dominance, the empire was showing signs of age – the bureaucracy was creaking, there was internal strife, moral standards were low, the old forms of religion seemed empty, and barbarians were attacking the frontiers.

Despite almost three hundred years of intermittent persecution, and despite still being an illegal and marginal society, the church was one of the few remaining stabilising and civilising influences. Its sacrificial care for victims during a recent outbreak of plague had won the Christians many admirers, even if their convictions still seemed strange.

In 312, there were two claimants to the imperial throne. Maxentius held the capital city, Rome, but Constantine held most of the Western empire, had the support of much of the army and decided to march on Rome. At some point on his journey, according to two Christian historians (Lactantius and Eusebius), something unusual happened. Constantine apparently had a vision, in which he saw the sign of the cross with the sun rising behind it, and saw or heard the words *in hoc signo vince* (“In this sign conquer”). Constantine regarded this as a good omen and had the *labarum*, a version of the sign of the cross, painted on his soldiers’ equipment.

By October 312, he was camped north of the city preparing for what would be the showdown with his rival, but worried because he did not have the resources to sustain a long siege. Shortly after this, to everyone’s surprise, Maxentius decided to risk a battle outside

the city walls and Constantine's army won a decisive victory, forcing their opponents back across the Milvian Bridge into the city. Constantine took the city and became emperor, apparently convinced that the God of the Christians had given him victory.

Historians have argued for centuries about whether Constantine was genuinely converted, but what is certain is that he saw Christianity as a force that could unite and revive his crumbling empire. Within a year the persecution ended, as Constantine issued an edict of toleration, Christianity became a legal religion and Constantine invited church leaders to assist him in making the Roman Empire a Christian society.

In the following decades it seemed like revival – massive church growth, wonderful new church buildings, changes in laws and customs, church leaders taking on political and social roles, Constantine ruling as a Christian emperor. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity had become the state religion, the *only* legal religion, and it was pagans who were being persecuted.

The system known as Christendom was coming into being – an alliance between church and state that would dominate Europe for over a thousand years and that still impacts the way Christians think and act.

### **The Christendom shift**

Two opposite assessments have been made of what happened in the 4<sup>th</sup> century:

- That this was a God-given opportunity which the church rightly seized and which ensured the triumph of the church and of Christianity in Europe;
- That this was a disaster that perverted the church, compromised its calling and hindered its mission, achieving through infiltration what 300 years of persecution had failed to achieve. That this was not the triumph of the church over the empire but the triumph of the empire over the church.



What do you think about this shift?

From what you have heard so far, do you agree with either assessment?

Might there be other ways of looking at what happened?

# A

The Anabaptist tradition has been deeply suspicious of the Christendom shift and its impact on many matters of discipleship, mission and church life. Here are two examples:

Pilgram Marpeck (important Anabaptist leader/writer in Strasburg and Augsburg until 1556): “The early Christians to the time of Constantine exercised no temporal rule or sword among themselves. The command of their master did not allow it. He granted them only the sword of the Word. Whoever, after sufficient admonition would not listen, was regarded as a Gentile and unbeliever [Matt. 18:17]. But when at that time, the pope, as a servant of the church was married to Leviathan, that is, temporal power, but in the disguise of Christ, the Antichrist was conceived and born and has now been revealed.”

The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren (c1580): “At that time, however, the thirty-fourth pope, Sylvester, testified to Constantine the Great, the forty-third emperor, and won him over with many flattering words, accepting him as a Christian through baptism. With the good intention of doing God a service, the emperor obtained peace throughout his kingdom for the pope, as the bishop of Rome, and for all those who called themselves Christians. Here the pestilence of deceit that stalks in darkness and the plague that destroys at midday swept in with force, abolished the cross, and forged it onto the sword. All this happened through the old serpent’s deceit.

“In the course of time the Roman bishops took over. They gained full power over emperors and kings, becoming the Babylonian harlot, seated in power on the seven-headed beast, daring to rule over all peoples, giving them drink out of her cup, and daring to alter time and law. Anyone who ventured to speak against the Roman bishop or pope was soon judged a heretic and condemned to die by the sword, fire, or other cruel means. In this way the sheep took on a thoroughly wolfish nature.

“These ungodly dealings were promoted by the emperor Charlemagne (who was chivalrous and pious in the world’s eyes) and by his son Louis and their descendants. They swore fealty to the popes to the point that they willingly did whatever the popes wished. They gave the papacy power, wealth, cities, islands, and kingdoms, with their people. In addition they endowed religious foundations, universities and monasteries, to spread the papal religion. In fact, whatever His Holiness the Pope wished for, these emperors were willing to grant, promising all kinds of privileges.

“And so the new ‘Christ’ in Rome, supported by the emperor, sent out his apostles into all lands with his ‘gospel’” of violence. He wanted to convert mighty kingdoms and strong nations by means of war and bloodshed. His realm increased so enormously as a gathering of the wicked that hardly anyone dared oppose it. So God the Almighty left these supposed Christians to their error of serving the creature rather than the Creator.”



Read the notes on the Christendom shift in the appendix and discuss these with others. If you want to read more on this shift, try Alan Kreider: *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Trinity, 1999).



What do you think now about the Christendom shift?  
Have your views changed?  
What aspects of the Christendom shift do you see as positive?  
Which concern you?

### **The fall of Christendom**

It is time to ask an important question: so what?

What is the legacy of Christendom? How is the story of Constantine and the Christendom shift relevant to us today? However we evaluate Christendom, two things are becoming increasingly clear.

*First*, the long era of Christendom is coming to an end. There is plenty of evidence now of a second shift, the transition from Christendom to post-Christendom:

- The percentage of the population attending churches in most European nations is now very small.
- Frequent calls are heard, even within state churches, for separating church from state, for changes to the parish system and the practice of infant baptism, and for recognition that a new era is dawning.
- Few now divide the world into Christian and pagan nations, and the growth of non-Christian religions in Europe is forcing us to explore the implications of witness in a pluralistic society.

Given its long history in Europe and its all-pervasive nature, the fall of Christendom is unlikely to be sudden or total. There are still many areas of life where the legacy of Christendom can be seen: bishops in the House of Lords, prayers at the start of each day in Parliament, the blasphemy laws, a favoured place for Christianity in the schools, the

inscriptions on our coins, etc. And even when the official relationship between church and state is dissolved, many vestiges of this system will remain.



Can you identify

- Further evidence that Christendom is becoming post-Christendom?
- Evidence that some aspects of Christendom are continuing?

Some Christians long for the way things used to be, but there is no way back. Our task is to rise to the challenges of Christian discipleship in a different kind of culture. There are real difficulties in this situation, but there are also great opportunities.

*Second*, it is a way of thinking rather than a political arrangement that is at the heart of Christendom. For fully three-quarters of its history the church in Western Europe has operated within a Christendom framework. Only in the first three centuries, in various persecuted dissident movements between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and increasingly in the last five centuries, has this way of thinking been challenged.

This way of thinking has deeply affected the way European Christians have interpreted the Bible, thought about mission and the church, made ethical decisions and understood discipleship. Among other things the Christendom mindset operates as though the church is at the centre of culture, responsible for the way history turns out, exercising a top-down

influence. This was how the Christendom churches worked and how they saw the world. But in post-Christendom, the churches are not at the centre but on the margins; any influence we have is likely to be bottom-up; and perhaps we can now learn once more to trust God to make sure history turns out right while we concentrate on being faithful disciples and seeking first his kingdom.

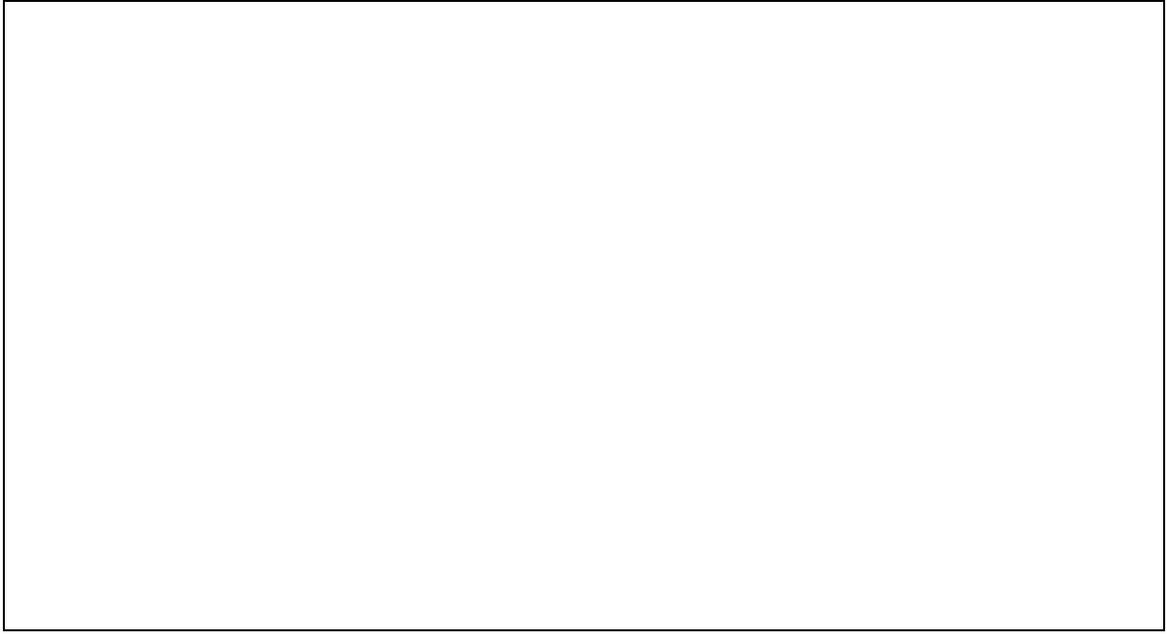
Being on the margins rather than in the centre will require a change of perspective. It will mean re-thinking many issues, discovering the ways in which the Christendom legacy continues to influence us. It will require creativity and courage as we engage with our changing culture and wrestle in fresh ways with what the gospel means in this culture.

What we look at in the next three sessions – the influence of Christendom on the way we read the Bible, the way we engage in mission and the way we “do” church – will be just a sample of the kinds of things we will need to explore. This may seem quite daunting. But we are not alone. We have as conversation-partners:

- The pre-Christendom churches that also operated from the margins and saw remarkable growth in the first 300 years
- The Anabaptists and other radical movements that challenged the Christendom system
- The God of the Bible who so often seems to operate, not from the centre, but from the margins.



Reading the Bible, engaging in mission and doing church – from what we have explored in this first session, what fresh thinking on these aspects of following Jesus do you think we need to do? What issues do you expect the next three sessions to throw up?



## Session 2: Reading the Bible after Christendom

### Introduction

The Christendom system and the way of thinking that went with it have deeply impacted the way European Christians interpreted the Bible through the centuries.

- Christians accepted the support of the political authorities in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and interpreted this as a blessing from God. So the church quite naturally began to adjust the way it interpreted the Bible to reflect the new status quo.
- The Bible tended, therefore, to be interpreted in ways that would maintain and support the existing social order that benefited both church and state. It was not interpreted in ways that might offer a prophetic challenge to this system.
- What's more, the dominant and central position of the church within society significantly affected the way it approached the Bible. The view from the centre is very different from the view from the margins! The story may be the same, but it is understood very differently.

But, as we suggested at the end of the previous session, the God of the Bible so often seems to operate, not from the centre, but from the margins.



Skimming through the Old and New Testaments (!), pick out examples of God acting from the margins rather than the centre.

If you need some passages to start you off, try reading:

*Exodus 1* (where we know the names of the midwives but not the Pharaoh)

*Luke 3:1-2* (where the word of God arrived in a marginal place)

# A

For three-quarters of its history, as we have seen, the European church has operated within Christendom, a system challenged until recently only by various persecuted movements, including the Anabaptists.

Those who dared to challenge Christendom usually did so because they had begun to interpret the Bible in different and (to their opponents) socially dangerous ways. This was how such movements typically developed:

- Their protest might start because they refused to accept the traditional interpretation of the Bible on some issue.
- As they read further, they began to ask whether it was the Christendom system itself that was the root of the problem, rather than a particular issue.
- And once they reached the decision that the Christendom system was suspect, they became deeply suspicious that the Bible was being misinterpreted to justify this system. It was as if they were now looking at the Bible through a different lens from the Christendom churches.
- This led to them thinking deeply about how to read and apply the Bible and to all kinds of interpretations and applications that threatened the Christendom system still further.
- These things reinforced each other. Their different view of the Bible energised their protest against Christendom, and their protest against Christendom energised their different view of the Bible.

So there were alternatives to the official line on biblical interpretation. But these were minority voices that were quickly and often brutally silenced.



Have you ever suspected that the traditional view on what the Bible says about something might be wrong?

Have you wondered if certain ways of using the Bible simply support those in power?

### **From New Testament to Old Testament**

From early in the Christendom era, it had become clear that the Bible would need to be reinterpreted in the light of the new realities. After all, the teaching of Jesus and of the New Testament seemed to be designed for communities of disciples, not for a whole society that was coerced or induced to be “Christian.” It was soon recognised that it was impractical to require the whole population to accept the New Testament teaching, so on all kinds of issues Old Testament norms were adopted for everyone except the clergy and the monks.

Church leaders also realised that the New Testament provided no useful guidelines for organising the kind of state religion that was emerging in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. But again they

found many helpful structures in the Old Testament. The Old Testament seemed to provide patterns and models on issues where the New Testament, and Jesus, was silent.

Consequently, the authority of the Old Testament grew and much New Testament teaching tended to be regarded as applicable only in the religious orders, in the future kingdom of God, or as unreachable ideals. These changes in biblical interpretation became established as orthodox and provided constant reinforcement of the system.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the model of church and understanding of discipleship that operated within Christendom seemed to its critics in the Anabaptist and other radical movements to be an Old Testament model:

- They called persistently for a restoration of New Testament models of church and discipleship.
- They disagreed with the foundations on which the Christendom models were built, and were deeply dissatisfied with the ways in which these models operated.



Can you think of any examples of the use of Old Testament rather than New Testament models of church and discipleship?

## Protest movements and the Bible

This was the situation that faced the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During the past 1200 years, despite the advances in understanding resulting from the work of generations of biblical interpreters and theologians, the Bible was still interpreted in ways that supported a supposedly Christian status quo.

There had been protests, especially from marginal movements like the Waldensians in France and the Lollards in England, and more recently from the Hussites in Bohemia, who were critical both of the methods used and the conclusions reached by mainline interpreters. In particular, they were concerned about the way Jesus seemed to have been marginalised.



Read the notes on the Waldensians and the Lollards in the appendix. These will give you some background information about these two radical movements.

# A

The beginning of the Waldensian movement in the conversion experience of Valdès, a businessman from Lyons, is a classic example of this.

Though there are several stories told about his conversion, reading the Gospels appears to have been a very significant component. Valdès' reaction, which was by no means unique in the Middle Ages, was to take literally Jesus' words about giving to the poor and preaching the gospel.

His starting point was not theological doctrine, nor criticism of the established church, but a rediscovery of the teaching of Jesus, which challenged his values and priorities and transformed his life.

Criticism of the church and the formation of a new movement followed, reluctantly on Valdès' part, as the radical implications of Jesus' teachings were contrasted with the social standing, priorities and activities of contemporary churches.

Other principles, apart from their insistence on the centrality of Jesus, characterised these protest movements:

- Their conviction that untrained Christians could understand the Bible challenged the monopoly of the priests.
- Their belief that the Bible was best understood in community challenged the individualism of much scholarship.
- Their determination to apply the Bible to their daily lives and communal practices challenged the prevailing emphasis on philosophical or mystical reflection rather than discipleship.
- Their suspicion that the Old Testament had been seriously misused to buttress a Christendom system built on the wrong foundations challenged the entire system.



How do you respond to these principles of interpreting the Bible?  
Are they now widely accepted or are they still a challenge to churches today?

### **The Reformation and the Bible**

What about the Reformers? Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and their colleagues insisted that the Bible, rather than church traditions, was authoritative. So how did they handle biblical interpretation? Did they adopt similar principles to the radicals? The Reformers seem to have moved through three stages in their opposition to the Catholic establishment.

- At first, they criticised blatant abuses, doctrinal errors and immorality without urging separation from the Catholic Church.
- Gradually they accepted that separation was inevitable and for a while toyed with radical ideas about the nature of the church and its relationship with society (ideas quite similar to those of the earlier radical groups).
- Finally, having secured the support of the political authorities, they rejected these radical options and set up alternative expressions of Christendom that removed its most objectionable features but maintained the basic framework.

How did this outcome affect their approach to biblical interpretation? They introduced some important changes, but they did not challenge the Christendom mindset that had dominated biblical interpretation for centuries. They emphasised justification by faith and so focused attention on the New Testament and on Jesus as redeemer, but they would not allow the teaching of Jesus to be normative for discipleship and church life. Though they insisted on the freedom of biblical interpretation from the scrutiny of church tradition or political authorities, in practice they frequently deferred to these authorities.

# A

It was left to another marginal movement to continue and develop the tradition of the medieval radicals. The Anabaptists came to realise that reforming the state church system was inadequate and that forming believers' churches was essential.

The earliest Anabaptists seem to have hoped that a thorough reformation of the state churches might be achieved, but they were soon disillusioned. As they reflected on this, they seem to have arrived quite quickly at the conclusion that the "fall" of the church at the time of Constantine was the chief issue, with infant baptism as its symbol.

Although one of their leaders, Balthasar Hubmaier, continued to operate for a while within a state church context, this was unusual among Anabaptists. The disaster at Münster in 1535, where a group of Anabaptists tried to impose its views on a whole city and were eventually massacred, seems to have removed all further toying with such options among Anabaptists.

By then, they had comprehensively rejected Christendom and its symbols. This radical stance enabled them to interpret the Bible in new ways:

- They too rejected two-tier Christianity with different standards and callings for different Christians, but, unlike the Reformers, Anabaptists chose to apply New Testament standards to all Christians.
- Instead of a two-tier Christendom, they argued that for Christians Jesus was the norm for lifestyle as well as for salvation. The Old Testament might still be relevant within society, but within believers' churches the New Testament governed discipleship and community life.
- And New Testament teachings were to be obeyed whatever their social implications. Many Anabaptists rejected interpretations of Romans 13 that seemed to require excessive deference to the political authorities.
- Unlike the Reformers, they were not in a dominant position. Although they were persecuted by others who claimed to be Christians, rather than by a pagan empire, Anabaptists regarded persecution as incompatible with true Christianity and so saw their experience as similar to the early Christians: the true church was always liable to such treatment, whatever the beliefs of the persecutors.
- Their approach to the Bible resembled the approaches of pre-Christendom and persecuted medieval radical interpreters more than those of the Reformers or most interpreters since Constantine.
- Key elements in the Anabaptist approach were its recognition of all believers as interpreters and its insistence that the Bible should be interpreted in the local Christian community.

The way they operated had much in common with the principles and practices of earlier radical groups, as is clear from these examples of their teaching about interpreting the Bible:

Pilgram Marpeck (important Anabaptist leader/writer in Strasburg and Augsburg until 1556): “God captures the wisdom of the wise in their treachery; He entrusts His truth to the faithful and truly innocent ones, but conceals it from the highly learned, wise, sly, and obstinately independent ones. He reveals it to the simple, uneducated, coarse, faithful people, who witness to the truth with poor, coarse, simple words and speech, and feel compelled to speak against such sophists...Just as God has always begun so will God conclude: with the faithful and simple people...Therefore, to learn the language of the simple, faithful, truly believing hearts is now...a thousand times more necessary than to learn Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or other languages.”

An early Swiss Brethren tract complained: “all judgment and everything, yes everyone in his conscience, is bound to the preacher and to his teaching, whether it be good or evil...no one may speak but the preacher, and thus the congregation is deprived and robbed of all right of judgment concerning matters of the soul, being bound exclusively to the preachers and their understanding, contrary to the word of God.” Early Swiss congregations were shaped in opposition to a model of church that gave no scope for multiple participation, discussion and communal judgement. This was regarded as contrary to the very Scripture being read in the churches, as a form of robbery, and as a kind of bondage. The tract continued to criticise state churches for being dominated by a preacher. “When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, neither speaking nor prophesying, who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?” the authors asked, “or confess according to I Corinthians 14 that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?”

Dirk Philips (important Anabaptist leader in the Netherlands and North Germany until 1568): “The false prophets cover and disguise their deceptive doctrines by appealing to the letter of the Old Testament consisting of shadows and types. For whatever they cannot defend by the New Testament Scriptures, they try to establish by the Old Testament...from this fountain have flowed the sacrilegious ceremonies and pomp of the church of Antichrist and the deplorable errors of the seditious sects.”

Menno Simons (major Anabaptist leader and writer in the Netherlands from 1536): “The Scriptures do not need interpretation; they need only to be obeyed.

An early Anabaptist tract asked, “Why should God make known his will if he would not will that a person do it?”

## The Bible after Christendom

As Christendom fades, the approach to biblical interpretation that characterised the Christendom era and was unchallenged by the Reformers has become increasingly problematic, whereas the alternative approach of the Anabaptists and earlier dissident groups may offer helpful perspectives. For example:

- In a context where churches are no longer in the centre but on the margins, the perspectives of earlier marginal movements make sense. Things look different from the margins. Marginal groups identify with different characters in the story, ask different questions, and apply biblical teaching differently.
- Once the church recognises it can no longer control society and does not need to worry that its interpretation of the Bible might challenge social norms, it can rediscover the prophetic tradition that permeates the Bible and the teaching of Jesus. New ways of thinking become possible.
- The suspicion found in the radical tradition that the Bible is often used by those in power (in church and state) to justify their actions may be helpful. We may have plenty of unlearning to do as we gradually recognise how much traditional ways of interpreting biblical teaching were affected by the Christendom mindset. A degree of suspicion may be healthy.
- The insistence on recognising Jesus as the centre of the Bible and on adopting New Testament norms for discipleship and church life may help us rediscover the Jesus whom Christendom marginalised and to question the ways in which the Old Testament was interpreted under Christendom.



Read:

*Luke 19:11-27.* Who is the king here – Jesus or Herod?

*Mark 12:41-44.* What difference does it make if you also read the verses before and after this story (*12:38-40; 13:1-2*)?

*Romans 13:1-7.* What difference does it make if you also read the verses before this passage (*13:17-21*)?



Using the above four principles, think about fresh ways of understanding and applying these and other passages.

## Session 3: Mission after Christendom

### What's wrong with evangelism?

In the last session we explored the legacy of Christendom in the area of biblical interpretation. Here we will examine its legacy in the area of mission – especially the evangelistic dimension of mission. Not that this is the whole of mission, but it is here that the Christendom legacy is most evident and, perhaps, most problematic.



What response would you expect if you asked a friend whether he or she would like to be evangelised?

All you are really asking is if you can give someone some good news. What images, fears or expectations are associated with this word?

What is the popular view of evangelism and evangelists?

Where did this come from?

Evangelism seems to be equally unpopular inside and outside the churches. But why? Why is evangelism seen as threatening, embarrassing and intrusive? There may be various reasons, including the unhelpful antics, dubious morality and inappropriate

methods of some contemporary evangelists, misrepresentation in the media, insensitivity by enthusiastic but unwise church members, etc.

But in this session we will explore the suggestion that, at root, the popular perception of evangelism is another legacy of the Christendom era. To justify this claim, we will need to investigate how evangelism was understood in the Christendom centuries and how the Christendom shift impacted evangelism.

## **The Reformers and mission**

In the last session we briefly compared the approach of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers and their contemporaries, the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists rejected the whole Christendom system; the Reformers accepted it. No wonder the ways in which they interpreted the Bible were so different! As we examine now the impact of Christendom on the subject of mission, we will return to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and compare the approaches of these two movements. Once again, their approaches are very different.

Actor Michael Caine is famous for the phrase “Not a lot of people know that.” Well, “not a lot of people know that” the Reformers did not really see 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as a mission field. Protesting against widespread abuses, challenging doctrinal errors and superstitions, the Reformers were a first-generation movement of reform and renewal that profoundly affected church and society. But they rarely engaged in evangelism. Most taught that the Great Commission had been fulfilled centuries earlier and was simply not applicable in their generation. They insisted that the office of evangelist had died out with the apostles and prophets, leaving pastors and teachers to lead the churches. They turned Catholic churches into Reformed churches wherever they had liberty and governmental support to achieve this, but they did not generally plant new churches. They did not evangelise their contemporaries. Why?

Fundamentally, the reformers accepted the presupposition of the previous millennium that Europe was Christian. Following the adoption, early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, by the Roman emperor Constantine, of Christianity as the state religion, and the subsequent decision at the end of that century by the emperor Theodosius to outlaw all other religions, the church gradually shifted from operating in *mission* mode to operating in *maintenance* mode, at least within the boundaries of what soon became known as Christendom. The imperial invitation to the church to become, in effect, the religious department of the empire revolutionised the idea of mission, along with many other aspects of Christian faith and practice. Over the next few centuries Christianity was spread by force of arms and persuasion until the whole of Western Europe was officially Christian. Church and state were now the pillars of a sacral society, where dissent was suppressed and almost everyone was assumed to be Christian by birth rather than by choice. Infant baptism marked the obligatory entry into this Christian society.

From being a powerless and sometimes persecuted minority that nevertheless could not refrain from talking about their faith in Jesus and his impact on their lives, the church had

become a powerful institution that could impose its beliefs and practices on society. Evangelism was no longer a winsome invitation to choose a deviant and dangerous way of living, and to join a marginal community that was puzzling and yet strangely attractive. The church's mission now involved:

- Ensuring doctrinal conformity.
- Enforcing church attendance.
- Enshrining moral standards in the criminal law.
- Eradicating choice in the area of religion.

Evangelism in its New Testament sense became irrelevant. If the whole empire (with the awkward exception of the Jews) was now Christian, evangelism was obsolete. The role of the church was to provide pastoral care and teaching, and ensure that church members were good citizens. Church leadership was essentially maintenance-oriented. Pastors and teachers were needed, but apostles had died out, evangelists were redundant and prophets were a nuisance in a church supporting, rather than challenging, the status quo. Church leaders declared that, at least within Europe, the Great Commission had been fulfilled.



Read *Ephesians 4:7-16*. Is the Christendom understanding of this passage – that some of the gifts mentioned here were foundational but not continuing – legitimate? If only two of the five gifts are recognised of those given to equip the church and bring it to maturity, how is the church affected? Do people exercise these gifts anyway? Or is the church that denies them deprived of them?

# A

For a thousand years this remained the orthodox view, with only marginalised radical groups, like the Waldensians and Lollards, dissenting. Among these groups, the gifts of apostles, prophets and evangelists were sometimes rediscovered, maintenance was set firmly in a mission context, and something closer to New Testament evangelism was restored.

The Protestant Reformation challenged neither the Christendom framework nor the demise of mission. But their contemporaries, the Anabaptists, rejected Christendom as a delusion and designated Europe as a mission field. To the Reformers, as to their Catholic opponents, this was an affront, and dangerous to both church and society. One of the few subjects on which Catholics and Protestants agreed in this era was that Anabaptism was subversive and needed to be eradicated.

Christendom, of course, survived the challenge represented by Anabaptism. But the old medieval Christendom was fractured into competing Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed mini-Christendoms, and the seeds of the “free churches” had been sown. In time, under the pressure of secularisation, urbanisation and pluralisation, Christendom would wither. But for centuries still, the Christendom mentality would dominate European Christianity and ensure that the church was still oriented towards maintenance rather than mission.

### **Christendom-style evangelism**

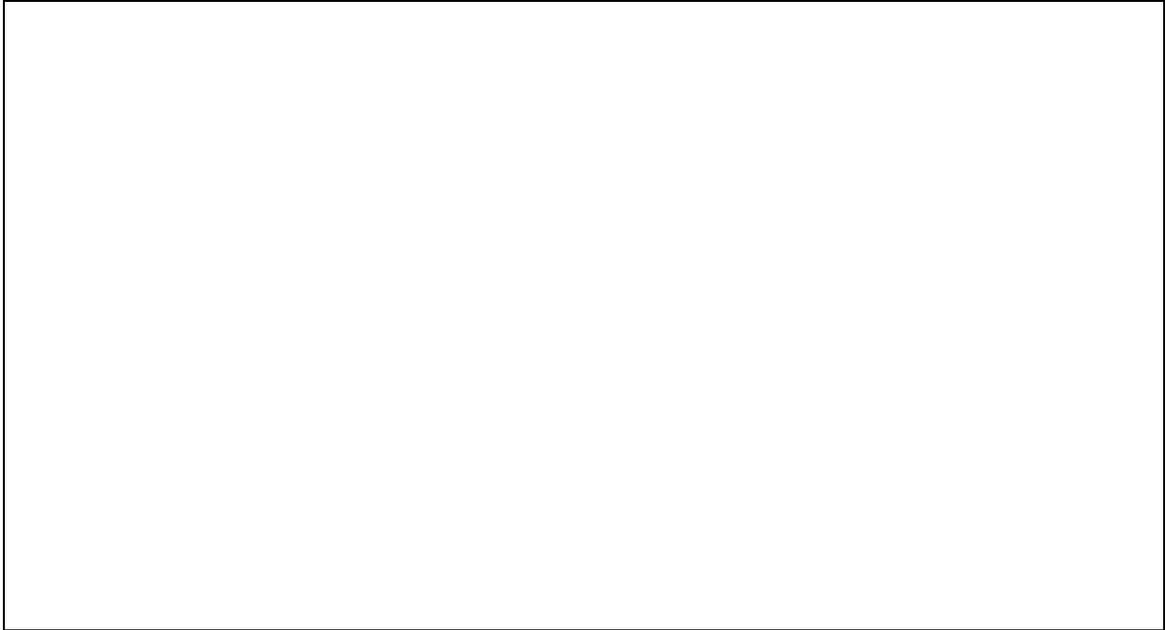
Evangelism returned in the later years of the Christendom era in two modes: first, as mission to the non-Christian world outside Europe (first by Catholics, then by Moravians, Baptists and other Protestants); and second, as a response to the rather belated recognition that Europe was, at best, only nominally Christian. But evangelism was still operating within a Christendom framework:

- Within Europe, it was assumed that the Christian story and the main points of the Christian message were familiar, so evangelism primarily involved repeated attempts to re-energise faith and commitment that seemed lukewarm. The emphasis was on calling people to make a renewed commitment to the implications of the gospel and to express this by activities such as reading the Bible, attending church more regularly, living morally respectable lives, and meeting the needs of others in a society without a welfare state.
- Beyond Europe, despite the heroic and often exemplary efforts of dedicated pioneer missionaries, evangelism too often degenerated into attempts to coerce or induce conversion and to impose a supposedly Christian and superior European culture on other societies.

While Christendom remained relatively intact, these approaches to evangelism were not perceived as problematic, but the gradual demise of Christendom has changed this. This history has left the churches with a dubious legacy and has left contemporary society with a justifiable suspicion of evangelistic initiatives. For evangelism in the Christendom mode is not good news for contemporary society, nor an appropriate way for Christians to operate in a changed and changing climate. If we are to evangelise our contemporary, post-Christendom society, we will need to understand this and look for a new model of evangelism that is both more consistent with the New Testament and more appropriate for our society.



What echoes of Christendom-style evangelism do you detect in contemporary evangelism or church life in general?



Let's explore this further. What were the objectionable features of evangelism under Christendom?

1. *The use of force to spread the gospel.* European Christendom developed into the most powerful civilisation on earth – economically, politically, technologically and militarily. The assumption was that this achievement was a sign of God's favour and that Europeans had a divine responsibility not only to evangelise but also to civilise other cultures. To accomplish these dual goals, force could be used where necessary.

Another significant consequence of the Christendom shift had been the abandonment of the traditional commitment of the church to peace and non-coercion. In its place new stances developed, of which the most popular were the "Just War" and the "Holy War" positions. The Just War position was a Christianised version of classical Roman thinking on when force was justified – or, as its opponents argued, a corruption of the church by pagan ideas. The Holy War, or Crusade, was derived (like so much in the early years of Christendom) from a reading of the Old Testament and so was more "biblical" than the Just War position but also more frightening. Often in practice there were elements of both approaches in the arguments of individuals and nations. Both positions allowed or even required Christians to fight on behalf of their nation or civilisation.

Since evangelising and civilising were both regarded as God's calling on European Christians, the use of force might be applied to either end or both together. So often the Bible and the sword went together. Missionaries and adventurers, evangelists and conquistadors, travelled together and supported each other in their related callings and purposes. Happily, there were occasions when the presence and intervention of missionaries prevented acts of injustice, cruelty and oppression – this aspect of the story is often not given as much credit as it deserves. But too often the work of evangelism was

carried out by imposition rather than invitation, leading to forcible conversions and baptisms at sword point.

Within Christendom, too, evangelism – understood in the ways noted above (ensuring conformity, enforcing church attendance, etc.) – was often coercive. Because of the close identification of religion and politics, church and state, heresy was regarded as subversive. Not believing what you were expected to believe was treasonous as well as doctrinally deviant. Within and beyond Christendom evangelism was carried out by the powerful on the powerless, and conformity was coerced.



Read the disturbing examples in the appendix of the use of force to spread the gospel.

2. *The use of inducements to spread the gospel.* In the early years of Christendom, it suddenly became socially advantageous to be a Christian. Now that the emperor was a church member and the state was Christian, those who wanted to be promoted to high office found that professing Christianity was significant (not that much seems to have changed in US presidential campaigns!). This situation was a radical change from pre-Christendom, where Christian faith was a barrier to social advancement. It was in the army where this change was most apparent: by early in the 5<sup>th</sup> century only Christians could serve in the Roman army.

And when Christendom missionaries took the gospel to other places they continued to operate in this way. As well as blatant examples of bribery to win converts, there were less obvious but equally dubious forms of inducement. One of these is the well-known phenomenon of “rice Christians”, where those who expressed faith in Christ knew they would be rewarded with all kinds of material assistance. In other contexts those who converted could expect favourable treatment by the colonial authorities. It could be argued, of course, that this was simply extending to other cultures the benefits of a Christian civilisation, but not everyone saw it this way – especially those who rejected these inducements and those who experienced exploitation at the hands of those who represented the gospel.



What inducements do churches today offer to potential converts? Are these legitimate?

3. *Anti-Semitism.* The story of the treatment of the Jews in Christendom is one of the more shameful aspects of European church history. The Jews fitted no more easily into a Christian Roman Empire than a pagan one: they stood out as different, non-conformist and threatening. Furthermore, as some theologians and priests insisted, the Jews were the “Christ-killers”, responsible for the death of Jesus (whose own Jewishness seems to have been forgotten). The Holocaust, carried out by a Christendom nation, was another horrific expression of a long history of oppression, victimisation, coercion, persecution and bigotry.

4. *Cultural imposition.* When Christendom missionaries evangelised other cultures, they not only used coercion and inducements (“flattery and battery”), but they brought with them the assumption that their own culture, being Christian, was superior to all others. Christendom had removed any tension between gospel and culture, so that European civilisation was regarded as Christian, and missionaries were often unable to separate out gospel and culture.

The tendency of Christendom evangelists, therefore, was to look down on or demonise the cultural values and practices of others, while treating the values and practices of their own culture as superior and godly. This resulted in the imposition of European culture and the suppression of native elements. Converts were required to adopt a certain theology, dress in certain ways, erect church buildings in certain styles, sing songs to European tunes and in many other ways replace their own culture with that of the evangelists. The result of this was to detach converts from their own people and to make them dependent on the missionaries. It also communicated the message that Christianity was a European religion, which has had significant long-term consequences.

5. *Top-down evangelism.* Within Christendom, too, evangelism often carried with it certain cultural overtones and expectations. Because church and state were partners, and church leaders were respected members of the establishment, evangelism was imposed from the top of society by those who were educated, articulate, wealthy and powerful. This impacted the message preached, which was often moralistic and encouraged conformity to upper- or middle-class culture. Sin was presented as non-conformity to the values of this culture.



How do these factors – anti-Semitism, cultural imposition and top-down evangelism – hinder evangelism today?

# A

What can we learn from Anabaptist approaches to evangelism? In the appendix are a number of articles published over the past 10 years in *Anabaptism Today*. They offer:

- Insights into the evangelistic principles and practices of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists.
- Reflections from an Anabaptist perspective on the meaning and methods of evangelism today.
- An application of Anabaptist values to the sensitive issue of evangelism in a multi-faith society.



Try to summarise what you have learned from these articles and from this session about evangelism.

What recommendations would you make to your own church about the way in which it evangelises?

## **Mission in post-Christendom**

What are the implications for mission of the cultural shift from Christendom to post-Christendom?

- Churches under Christendom, as we have seen, operated in “pastoral mode”, but in post-Christendom they must operate in “mission mode”. This will require a significant shift, so that mission is not bolted on to church programmes but is recovered as the purpose of the church.
- It is vital to recognise that a post-Christendom society is not the same as a pre-Christendom society. Missiologist David Bosch writes: “Is a secularised and dechristianised European...a not-yet-Christian or a no-more Christian? Such a person is a post-Christian rather than a pre-Christian. This calls for a special approach in communicating the gospel.”
- In a pre-Christendom society, Christianity is “news”, presenting another religious and social option. There is a freshness and challenge about it that demands a response. In a post-Christendom society it is difficult to persuade people that Christianity has anything fresh to offer. The assumption is that it has been tried

and found wanting, and that wherever else answers to spiritual questions are to be found, it is not in Christianity.

- Many assumptions which were reasonable under Christendom are no longer so in a post-Christendom society: going to church is not a normal social activity; there is widespread ignorance of the Christian story; and we no longer live in a “guilt culture” – so what is the good news for those who do not feel guilty?
- We must engage with a complex situation, recognising that in a society that seems to be secular there is evidence of both *residual religion* – vestiges from Christendom, memories of faith, ceremonies and superstitions, marginal beliefs – and *resurgent religion* – reactions against secularism, importing religious beliefs from other cultures or recovering ancient paganism. Different strategies will be needed for different groups and individuals in our society.
- But there are real advantages in this situation: nominal Christianity is declining and churches are increasingly made up of committed Christians who are there by choice or those who are searching for spiritual reality and are exploring Christianity.



A church “made up of committed Christians” sounds very Anabaptist (and also rather like the New Testament!). But can such a church *also* be open-edged, accessible to those “who are searching for spiritual reality and exploring Christianity”? Can a “gathered” church also be a “gathering” church?

What, then, might characterise mission in a post-Christendom society? Here are just a few suggestions:

- It might involve educating church members about Christendom and its effects and deciding which way to face – back to Christendom or away from it.
- It might involve trying to root out some of the remaining vestiges of Christendom as inappropriate and unjust in a plural society.
- It might involve insisting on the importance of free choice and defending the rights of minorities – including those with whom Christians disagree.
- It might involve equipping Christians to offer contributions on social and political issues as a “prophetic minority” rather than a “moral majority.”
- It might involve fresh theological insights as we listen to our culture and discover what the good news is in a society that dismisses guilt but longs for meaning, identity and belonging.



What else can you think of?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing or drawing.

## Session 4: Church after Christendom

### Introduction

During the Christendom era the church was a dominant institution within Western society – wealthy, powerful, culturally central and often coercive. Today the church is on the margins – declining in numbers, wielding limited influence and representing one of many secular and religious options in a plural society.

There are significant advantages in this changed status, some of which we have already noted:

- Most of those in the churches are there by choice rather than as a result of social pressures or expectations.
- Churches can no longer impose their views or values on others but can participate in social discussions instead by modelling and commending alternatives.
- Operating from the margins seems more in line with the way the God of the Bible generally acts and holds out exciting new possibilities.
- Churches with limited resources have opportunities to reflect on what really matters and to simplify church structures and programmes.
- Things look different from the margins and this perspective can help churches to identify with other marginalised groups within society.
- The demise of Christendom encourages fresh thinking about all kinds of issues in church life and an outburst of creativity.



What other advantages or opportunities can you think of?

The problem we face, though, is that many feel despondent rather than energised by this move from the centre to the margins. The Christendom legacy remains strong (evident in phrases like “This used to be a Christian country” and “I remember when the church was full”), and discouragement over loss of numbers and influence hinders recognition of the potential of being church on the margins.

Perhaps this is why we need as conversation-partners the Anabaptist tradition, which has generally operated from the margins, the churches of the first three centuries, which were on the margins of their society, and the biblical authors, who again and again show us God acting from the margins.

## **A struggling church**

There is no doubt that there are serious issues facing the churches and that church life feels like a struggle to many people. Here are just a few of the signs of this struggle:

- All over Britain and across the denominations there is massive disillusionment with church life. Large numbers of church members are simply dropping out of church, including many leaders and core members. Many others remain out of loyalty but are struggling, bored and weary.
- Congregations are ageing at a faster rate than the general population, so unless ways are found to connect with younger people, the seemingly inexorable decline in numbers and closure of buildings will continue.
- Several denominations are facing a chronic leadership shortage as fewer and older candidates come forward to be trained and accredited as leaders.
- Various evangelistic strategies and “church growth” strategies over the past three decades have failed to turn the tide of decline. There are effective strategies and growing churches, but these do not offset the decline.
- Some denominations are recognising that, if present trends continue, they will no longer be viable as national organisations within the next 30 years.



What other signs of struggle can you identify?

## **An emerging church**

But there are also Christians all over the country exploring fresh ways of being church – developing new approaches to worship, mission and community. Some are planting new churches; others are working to renew existing churches. Some are experimenting with new ideas, structures and rhythms; others are drawing on ancient resources, adapting these for contemporary church life. Some are involved in large, well-resourced churches; others are working on the margins with few resources.

There are several popular new models on offer: seeker-sensitive, cell church, missionary congregations, alternative worship, etc. Each in different ways represents an attempt to respond to and engage with a changing social context. One significant shift is from the neighbourhood parish model of the Christendom era to the network model of post-Christendom.

But this is a time of transition, with more questions than answers about the future shapes of the church – and it will be shapes rather than one shape that will emerge in a plural culture. After Christendom culture is plural, so expressions of church must also be diverse. There are many experiments taking place, some of which may be short-lived, but others may give us clues and insights for the future. It is a challenging and intriguing time.



Read some stories of emerging churches in the extract from Stuart Murray & Anne Wilkinson-Hayes: *Hope from the Margins* (Grove, 2000) contained in the appendix.



What other stories do you know? How would you like to re-configure church?

# A

Deep in the Anabaptist tradition is dissatisfaction with existing forms of church and various experiences of doing church differently. The *forms* of church life that were both revolutionary and relevant in the 16<sup>th</sup> century cannot be transferred to the different culture and context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the *values* they expressed can be. The Anabaptist tradition has challenged inherited Christendom assumptions about church and suggests alternatives that have much to offer to Christians after Christendom. Some of these ways of doing church might help to renew existing churches; others might prompt the planting of new churches (a very Anabaptist practice).

Three of the seven core convictions of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network relate to this:

*3. Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.*

*4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted.*

*5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship that sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.*



What issues do these convictions raise about re-configuring church life today?  
Which are most relevant in your own context?  
How might you respond?

The Anabaptist tradition has stimulated reflection on several key areas of church life, challenging assumptions from the Christendom era and exploring other ways of building Christian communities. Its main contribution is not to suggest new forms of church life but to remind us of important community values that matter regardless of the forms that may be adopted.

Here is a selection of questions the tradition poses:

- Is monologue preaching the most appropriate way of learning together?
- What role does mutual accountability (church discipline) play in church life?
- Is tithing a liberating or restrictive practice, and does it build community?
- What is the role of leadership in the church and who should exercise this?
- How important is it that worship should be multi-voiced?
- Since conflicts are bound to occur at times, how can these be handled well?

In this session we can explore briefly only the first two questions, but hopefully these will stimulate you also to explore the others (and more).

### **Problems with preaching**

Klaus Runia, in his book *The Sermon Under Attack*, quotes a rather unkind definition of preaching as “a monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes.” He explores some of the reasons why monologue preaching has been criticised and identifies some important shifts that have taken place in the social context within which preaching is now situated and which challenge the practice of preaching.

- A *cultural* shift away from passive instruction to participatory learning, from paternalism to partnership, from monologue to dialogue, from instruction to interaction.
- A *societal* shift away from an integrated world to a world where networks overlap, a shift away from simplicity to complexity. For preachers, this raises the issue of how to address such a complex world: the biblical text may not change but how are we to make the connections on our own?
- A *media* shift away from logical argument to pic ‘n’ mix learning, from linear to non-linear methods of conveying information, the use of images as well as words, short contributions from diverse points of view, and open-ended presentation that allows freedom to choose your own conclusion.

These shifts can all be understood as expressions of what many are referring to as the end of the culture of modernity and the emergence of postmodernity.



In the appendix there is a summary of the main features of modernity and postmodernity.

We live in an uncomfortable and unsettling era of transition, when we must both be open to change and hesitant before jumping on bandwagons. But there is no doubt that many in a postmodern culture do not appreciate monologue presentations. Sermons may be very poorly suited to this environment.

It is tempting (especially for preachers) immediately to react to these challenges and to defend preaching. Some of the responses would include:

- Preaching is a biblical mandate, not just a form of speech to be assessed like other forms of communication;
- Preaching is not just about conveying information, it is a sacrament, an encounter with God;
- Social and cultural shifts come and go, we should not be unduly influenced by such things;
- Preaching has served well countless generations of Christians.

### **Christendom and preaching**

But it is not just cultural changes or increasing evidence that sermons are ineffective that are causing some to question the adequacy of monologue sermons. Challenges to the sermon have come also from those who have researched its use in earlier periods of history when the cultural setting was quite different.

An extensive critique of the sermon is offered by David Norrington, whose book *To Preach or Not to Preach* examines evidence from the New Testament and the early centuries of church history. He argues that monologue preaching was present in this period but was used only occasionally rather than regularly. Much more common were discussion, dialogue, interaction and multi-voiced participation. He concludes that the central role of monologue preaching in many churches today has no biblical precedent or support from the early period.

Where did this emphasis on monologue preaching come from? Norrington does not write out of the Anabaptist tradition, but he sounds quite Anabaptist when he argues that the monologue sermon achieved a dominant place in the church not because this dominance was biblical or even traditional within the early churches, but because the church was adapting to the implications of the Christendom shift that took place in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries:

- The church was becoming respectable and increasingly conventional following the adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion. Huge numbers of half-converted pagans were flooding into the churches. Monologue preaching seemed essential for instructing those who had little understanding of even the basics of the faith.
- Congregations were swelling in numbers and massive church buildings were being erected. Monologue preaching seemed the only realistic option in large basilicas with thousands in the congregation. The size of congregations and the architecture of church buildings have had through the centuries at least as much influence on the way churches operate as biblical and theological principles.
- The church was gradually adopting from the surrounding pagan culture various assumptions about communication and, in particular, a rhetorical model that was more concerned about demonstrating the skill and knowledge of the speaker than about the impact on the listeners.
- The exercise of charismatic gifts and ministries within the church had required opportunities for participation by those who were gifted in diverse ways. But as church life became steadily more formal and institutional, gifts such as prophecy became inconvenient and unsettling. Sermons were safer. The dominance of the preacher grew as such gifts were marginalised.
- The gradual development of a clerical caste resulted in the increasing dominance of the clergy over the laity. And the clergy were demanding the same kind of authority as secular leaders and professionals. In this hierarchical environment, the clergy preached and the laity listened.

## A

Is Norrington correct? One way of testing his conclusions is to examine later movements that questioned or rejected some of the aspects of church life which Norrington claims were influential in the development of the monologue sermon.

If we find groups which challenged clericalism, recovered charismatic gifts, operated through smaller and more intimate gatherings and had high expectations of the level of faith and understanding of church members, but who nevertheless continued to rely primarily on the monologue sermon, we may be less impressed by his arguments.

Three groups in European church history that fit the criteria are the Waldensians, the Lollards and the Anabaptists. Common to all these movements was an expectation that the Spirit would lead them into truth, that the Spirit worked through all, not just through preachers and leaders, and therefore that interaction and multi-voiced church life was crucial.

We will concentrate here on the Anabaptists, who explored this issue in their writings and congregational practices.

Although the Anabaptists did not abandon sermons, they were wary of monologues and critical of the lack of participation in the Catholic and Protestant churches around them. They were outspoken about this issue and argued from Scripture that something was wrong. An early Anabaptist tract (mentioned in an earlier session) quoted Paul in I Corinthians 14 urging that all should contribute when the church met together and complained: “When some one comes to church and hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent... who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?” The reformers had proclaimed the priesthood of all believers but the Anabaptists were not impressed with what they found in the reformers’ churches. The monopoly of the Catholic priest seemed to have been replaced by the monopoly of the reformed preacher. Experts were still disempowering the congregation and hindering it from becoming mature.

Many Anabaptist congregations consciously moved away from the monologue tradition towards a more interactive style with multiple participation and dialogue. An Anabaptist under interrogation in 1527, Ambrosius Spitelmaier, explained how this worked: “When they have come together, they teach one another the divine Word and one asks the other: how do you understand this saying? Thus there is among them a diligent living according to the divine Word.” Among Anabaptists there were three common convictions about how God spoke to his people: first, that listening to the Holy Spirit was more important in understanding Scripture than education or ordination; second, that the Holy Spirit might speak through any member of the church as they meditated on the Bible; and third, that hearing and discerning the Word of God was a community practice rather than an individual practice. Multiple participation, dialogue and interaction were vital.

So, challenges to monologue preaching come *both* from those who recognise that it is a problematic form of communication in contemporary culture *and* from those who argue that its predominance lacks biblical and historical support and is rooted in a hierarchical and clerical understanding of church life, which disempowers most church members and limits the freedom of the Spirit to work through the whole body. After Christendom, as we adapt to life on the margins, perhaps we need to return to our biblical roots, learn from the Anabaptists and other dissident movements, and have the courage to do things differently.



Read through one of the Gospels. How much reliance did Jesus place on monologue sermons? What other teaching methods did he use?

### **An alternative approach**

It is not that monologue sermons are never appropriate – it is their dominance and the marginalising of alternatives that is the problem. What alternatives? Perhaps ways of learning together characterised by four features.

- *Learner-focused*, concerned more about what is learned than what is taught, more about outcome than methodology, about growth in understanding and maturity, about connecting with the issues and life situations of congregations.
- *Multi-voiced*, not dominated by one voice but open to participation by many people, recognising that nobody has a monopoly on revelation or wisdom, that there are resources in the congregation that will enable the Word of God to be heard with much greater power and clarity if these are released.
- *Open-ended*, prepared to leave loose ends and to live with uncertainty, to run the risk of allowing people space to think, to reflect, to explore, to ask how biblical teaching might apply to their situation, to offer resources rather than rules, seeing discipleship as a journey rather than a fixed state, posing questions rather than dispensing answers, inviting ownership rather than imposing conclusions.
- *Dialogue-based*, making room for questions, comments, challenges, ideas and exploration. This might mean drawing the congregation into sermons by asking questions, inviting responses, welcoming insights. It might mean discussion groups during or after sermons. It might mean having two speakers debating an issue together, with congregational participation. It might mean developing a culture where people know they are free to interrupt and interject comments.



Could this happen?

If these alternatives are to catch on, both preachers and congregations will need to be re-trained and re-orientated. This will take time. It will require persistence and courage. But it may be important for healthy church life after Christendom.



If you want to explore this further, try reading a short book by another member of the Anabaptist network, Jeremy Thomson: *Preaching as Dialogue: Is the Sermon a Sacred Cow?* (Grove, 1996)

## Church discipline



What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase “church discipline”?  
Do you know of any examples of church discipline?  
Have you been in a situation where it was needed but not exercised?

To many this sounds like a threatening and punitive idea. Others have never really thought about it, because they have not been in churches where it is practised. Church discipline is a form of *interactive pastoral care*. It means that members of a congregation love each other enough to challenge one another when they see a brother or sister living in ways that are inconsistent with their Christian commitment or are damaging the Christian community. The New Testament encourages the use of church discipline for a number of reasons:

- The restoration of brothers and sisters. At every stage of the process of church discipline, restoration to faith and discipleship is the aim and hope. Biblical church discipline is neither vindictive nor punitive, but aims to help them see what is happening and respond positively.
- The maintenance of Christian standards in the church. Failing to confront sin in the local congregation mars its distinctive Christian witness. Church discipline is utterly realistic: it keeps in view the goal of becoming a pure church but recognises the realities of life in congregations of recovering sinners and offers ways of handling difficulties.
- Deterring others from sin. Exercising church discipline has a salutary effect on the church, warning others against falling into sin.
- Deflecting God’s judgement. If a congregation does not exercise discipline, it may find God acting against it in judgement.

Church discipline is a process rather than a single activity. The New Testament outlines a number of stages in this process, which need to be understood flexibly rather than applied legalistically. At each stage there is the possibility of the discipline being effective and of no further steps being required.



Read *Matthew 18:15-20*. Search for other references to church discipline in the New Testament.

The Gospel writers rarely record Jesus talking about church life. This is one of very few references to the community his followers would form. We therefore know very little about Jesus' views of how congregations should function – but we do know he envisaged a community of disciples who would care enough for one another and for the church community to exercise discipline.

Although church discipline is found in every strand of New Testament teaching, it is rarely taught in churches or training colleges, or practised in local congregations.

Consequently, when church discipline does become necessary, neither church leaders nor congregations have a framework within which to operate effectively. Three results may follow:

- A failure to exercise church discipline at all, with all the personal, ethical and pastoral consequences of this;
- An unwise exercise of discipline, which damages individuals and the congregation;
- An ineffective exercise of discipline, where the congregation does not understand what is going on or participate properly in this.

There are several reasons for the widespread neglect of church discipline:

- Contemporary western culture is liberal and tolerant – of everything except intolerance. Church discipline is offensive to tolerance and individualism within our society. What right has a church to discipline its members?
- Misunderstandings and bad experiences of church discipline discourage churches from exploring this issue. Where it is practised at all, church discipline is often understood poorly and biblical teaching is misinterpreted. There is a fear of imitating this and encountering similar problems.
- The concern about churches becoming judgmental. The perceived need in many churches is for greater levels of acceptance and forgiveness within communities of recovering sinners. Church discipline seems a step in the opposite direction.
- Fear of the consequences may be a factor. This involves confrontation and the risk of unpopularity, making mistakes, alienating people.
- Churches are affected by the realities of consumer choice. Church discipline is harder to apply when those affected can simply start attending a different church.
- In a context of steady decline in church membership, where numbers are dropping anyway, reducing them further by exercising discipline is not attractive.

But at root once again is the legacy of the Christendom shift that distorted biblical ideas of church discipline:

- In many situations doctrinal, moral and relational standards were not upheld, and the spiritual health of churches and communities declined alarmingly.
- In other situations disagreements over doctrine or practice were equated with treason or sedition and treated accordingly.
- Church discipline became punitive, violent and political, as powerful church leaders imposed their ideas on others. The Inquisition was the most infamous example of this approach.
- Without a distinction between the church and the world, putting someone out of the church means exile or execution. Not surprisingly, church discipline was not seen as an attractive option!

And not surprisingly this legacy has not encouraged churches to explore this process. But perhaps after Christendom, in churches on the margins, we may be able to recover this practice and form accountable and supportive communities.

Perhaps we will need to recover this practice if we are to live distinctively and hopefully in a culture that pressurises us to conform to all kinds of values that are contrary to the gospel.

## A

Does the Anabaptist tradition offer help here? Yes and No.

- Anabaptists did teach and practise church discipline as part of their commitment to serious discipleship, the formation of accountable communities and the search for a pure church.
- But at times they were perfectionist and exercised oppressive forms of church discipline (although not as excessive as the state churches!), and this gave church discipline a bad name.
- However, they do at least offer a non-lethal legacy! We can learn both from their emphasis on the importance of this aspect of church life, and from their struggles to exercise it graciously.

Here are some examples of what 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptists wrote on the subject of church discipline:

In his *A Christian Instruction* (1526), Balthasar Hubmaier (the leading theologian among the Swiss Anabaptists) includes this dialogue: *Leon*: “What power have those in the church over one another?” *Hans*: The power of fraternal punishment.” *Leon*: “What is fraternal punishment?” *Hans*: When one sees his brother sin, he should go to him lovingly and reprove him fraternally in secret, that he may cease from his sins. If he does so cease, his soul has been won. If he is not successful, let him take two or three witnesses with him, and reprove the offence before them on the second occasion. If the man submits, all is well; if not, let it be told to the church. The church will call him to appear before it and reprimand him a third time. If he desists from his sin you have won his soul.” *Leon*: “Whence has the church this power?” *Hans*: “From the command of Christ when he said to his disciples: all that you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven also, and all that you loose on earth shall be loosed also in heaven.” *Leon*: “On what basis may a brother use this power over another?” *Hans*: “On the basis of the baptismal vow, whereby man submits himself to the church with all its members, according to the word of Christ”...*Leon*: “If he abandons sin, and avoids all paths on which he might fall and amends, how does the church treat him?” *Hans*: “It receives him again joyfully, like a father receives a lost son, as Paul did with the Corinthians, opens the doors of heaven to him, and lets him re-enter the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper.”

Hans Denck (young humanist scholar who became an Anabaptist but died of the plague), in *Concerning the Love of God* (1526), warns about right attitudes in this practice: “When you hear your brother say something that is strange to you, do not immediately argue with him, but listen to see whether he may be right and you can also accept it. If you cannot understand him you must not judge him, and if you think that he may be in error, consider that you may be in greater error.”

Participants in the Zofingen Colloquy (1532) explained their practice and contrasted this with the lack of discipline and pastoral care in other churches: “You have heard what gems adorn the church of God. Here is another in Matthew 18: If your brother sins against you, go and chastise him in private. There you may hear the command which God has given to those who claim to be his. But that among you this does not function, we will show. When people, papists and Lutherans assemble in the drinking-houses, where is the chastisement? If someone blasphemes the name of the Lord, no one admonishes him. Nor, if he does not improve his ways after admonition with two witnesses, does anyone take the matter to the congregation...Each brother must and may do it according to the rule of Christ.”



Is this feasible today? Read *Matthew 18:15-20* again. How might a church begin to teach and practise this kind of accountable community?



If you want to explore this further, read Stuart Murray: *Explaining Church Discipline* (Sovereign World, 1995)

### **Exploring other issues**

We have looked at two of the six issues highlighted earlier. Here are the other four again:

- Is tithing a liberating or restrictive practice, and does it build community?
- What is the role of leadership in the church and who should exercise this?
- How important is it that worship should be multi-voiced?
- Since conflicts are bound to occur at times, how can these be handled well?



How significant do you think these issues might be?

How can you investigate them further?

What other issues (beyond these four) might be worth exploring?

### **Learning from the early church**



In the previous session, and earlier in this session, we suggested that three conversation-partners might be particularly helpful as we find our way in the world after Christendom: the Bible, the early church and the Anabaptist movement. We have been listening to the Anabaptists here (though also to the Bible and the early churches). One further helpful resource in listening to the churches of the first three centuries is Alan Kreider: *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Grove Books, 1995).

## A church in exile?

In this section we will engage with the Bible as another conversation-partner, as we explore themes that are especially helpful for churches after Christendom that find themselves on the margins.

A number of images have been suggested to help Christians adjust to the new context:

- Some have suggested that the church should see itself as being *in exile*, no longer in a society that it can call its own, analogous to the experience of Israel taken captive to Babylon.
- Drawing on a similar period of Old Testament history, others have described the church as being *in a strange land* and facing the challenge of how to sing the Lord's song in this place.
- Some have seen the analogy as relating not just to the limited period of exile but the much longer period that followed the partial return of the exiles to their homeland. They have written of the church being *in diaspora*, scattered among the nations indefinitely.
- Another image is that of *resident aliens*, picking up the tension of being distinct from society but also engaged in it. Others encourage Christians in contemporary culture to regard themselves as both "citizens" and "aliens".
- Some have opted for a more dynamic model of the church as a *pilgrim people*, in contrast to the settler model of Christendom.

These images are essentially variations on a theme. Nigel Wright, one of the founder members of the Anabaptist Network combines a number of these elements when he writes: "The church is a pilgrim church not least because it does not call the tune. It is everywhere in a diaspora situation, existing eccentrically as an alien element with temporary residence status."

How might the imagery of exile help the church find its bearings in contemporary society?

- It might offer a way of coming to terms with the disorientation felt by those who still think of the church as central to Western culture;
- It might provide a lens through which to look at the calling of the church and of its members both to be a distinct community and to engage fully in an alien and sometimes hostile culture;
- It might assist church leaders to resist quick-fix solutions and focus on ways of living faithfully in a society they cannot control;
- It might encourage creativity in church life and mission, recognising that the exile was for Israel a time of remarkable spiritual creativity, despite the pain and suffering involved;
- It might liberate the church from unrealistic expectations and encourage more thoughtful and patient strategising.



Read and meditate on the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. What counsel do these writers offer that are relevant to the church in exile today?

As with all images and analogies, it is important not to push the imagery of exile too far. There are certain dangers in interpreting the present situation of the church in this way:

- The exile was a period of sudden and enormous upheaval, so that the changed situation was unmistakable. The demise of Christendom has been slow and almost imperceptible, and churches have struggled to realise the implications.
- The persistent hope of the exiles was that they would be able to return home to a land that still existed, albeit laid waste and under enemy rule, and this hope was finally fulfilled. However, it is unhelpful to think in terms of a return to anything like Christendom. Indeed language of *restoration*, *revival* and *return* is part of the problem, encouraging a backward-looking approach rather than pioneering into an unfolding future. The image of a pilgrim people may be a more helpful one.
- This is a remarkably Eurocentric perspective – in many parts of the world the church is thriving, moving from the margins towards the centre, growing in strength and influence. It is important not to endorse the perennial temptation to regard the European and North American context as definitive.

However, what these related images do make clear is that the church is on the margins of society and culture and needs to learn to function as a marginal community and to speak from the margins. What might this mean?

- It might mean a change of tone – speaking more humbly, more graciously and more winsomely than it has for centuries. Eddie Gibbs writes: “The church in the postmodern era must be prepared to witness with vulnerability and humility from the margins of society, much as it did in the first two centuries of its existence.”
- It might mean a public renunciation of past imperialism, triumphalism and insensitivity. Rather than bewailing lost influence, the church might confess its inappropriate use of power in the past.
- It might mean a greater readiness to listen to others and to participate in genuine dialogue and debate, rather than pontificating.
- It might mean a decision to reposition itself on the social and cultural margins in order, not only to be a voice for the voiceless, but also to learn from those voices already speaking there.

- It might mean concern that many popular contemporary models of church and evangelistic strategies appear to be connecting primarily (in some cases almost exclusively) with middle-class communities rather than those on the margins.

The end of Christendom offers us an opportunity to renounce its long identification with the powerful, wealthy and educated and rediscover our calling to be good news to the poor. The natural positioning of the church among the marginalised, thwarted by the Christendom shift, can be owned afresh. And since, in a postmodern culture, real change tends to come from the margins rather than from the centre (wherever this is), identifying with the margins and speaking from that context is not an abdication of responsibility but a choice of perhaps the most promising location to influence society.

### **What now?**

This course has drawn gratefully on insights from the Anabaptist tradition, a tradition that does not have all the answers to following Jesus on the margins but that does offer us an unusual angle of vision as we read the Bible and ponder issues of church life, mission and discipleship after Christendom. If you have found this helpful, there are other courses you can take that delve further into these ideas.

But it might be good – before you consider more courses – to take some time (alone or in conversation with others) to reflect on how you can follow through on things that have challenged and inspired you in this course. You might also want to spend some time in prayer, perhaps taking time out of your normal schedule. If it helps, you can write down here what seems most important to you and any decisions you might make in order to take Jesus seriously.

If you have questions about anything you have studied on this course, if you have ideas to share or suggestions to make, please do contact the Anabaptist Mennonite Network. You can also find further resources by visiting [www.amnetwork.org.uk](http://www.amnetwork.org.uk)

# Appendix

## Christendom

Christendom meant:

- The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of city, state or empire;
- The assumption that all citizens (except for the Jews) were Christian by birth;
- The development of a 'sacral society', where there was no effective distinction between sacred and secular, where religion and politics were inter-twined;
- The definition of 'orthodoxy' as the common belief, determined by socially powerful clerics supported by the state;
- The imposition of a supposedly 'Christian morality' on the entire population (although normally Old Testament moral standards were applied);
- A political and religious division of the world into 'Christendom' and 'heathendom';
- The defence of Christianity by legal sanctions to restrain heresy, immorality and schism, and by warfare to protect or extend Christendom;
- A hierarchical ecclesiastical system, based on a diocesan and parish arrangement, which was analogous to the state hierarchy and was buttressed by state support;
- A generic distinction between clergy and laity and relegation of laity to a largely passive role;
- Obligatory church attendance, with penalties for non-compliance;
- Infant baptism as the symbol of obligatory incorporation into this Christian society;
- The imposition of obligatory tithes to fund this system.

The basis of the Christendom system was a close partnership between the church and the state. The form of this partnership might vary, with either partner dominant, or with a balance of power existing between them. There are examples from the 4th century onwards of emperors presiding over church councils and of emperors doing penance imposed by bishops. Throughout the medieval period, power struggles between popes and emperors resulted in one or other holding sway for a time. But the Christendom system assumed that the church was associated with the Christian status quo and had vested interests in its maintenance. The church provided religious legitimation for state activities, and the state provided secular force to back up ecclesiastical decisions.

Christendom seems to have no place for elements of a New Testament vision such as:

- Believers' churches comprised only of voluntary members;
- Believers' baptism as the means of incorporation into the church;
- A clear distinction between 'church' and 'world';
- Evangelism and mission (except by military conquest or missions to heathen nations);
- The supranational vision of the new Christian 'nation';
- Faith in Christ as the exercise of choice in a pluralistic environment where other choices are possible without penalty.

Other elements of New Testament Christianity appear to be redefined within Christendom:

- 'Church' is defined territorially and membership in it is compulsory; the voluntary
- Communities called 'churches' in the New Testament are now called 'sects';
- A preoccupation with the immortality of the soul replaces the expectation of the kingdom of God, and the concept of the kingdom of God is either reduced to a purely historical entity, coterminous with the state church, or relegated to a future realm;
- The church abandons its prophetic role for a primarily priestly role, providing spiritual support for groups and individuals, sanctifying social occasions and state policies;
- Discipleship is interpreted in terms of good citizenship, rather than commitment to the ways of the kingdom of God;
- The church becomes primarily concerned about social order rather than social justice;
- Persecution is imposed *by* those claiming to be Christians rather than *upon* them.

## **The Lollards**

The Lollard movement emerged in late medieval England from the popularising of the ideas of Oxford scholar, John Wyclif. Between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth century, the Lollards flourished, suffered persecution, attempted armed resistance, were suppressed and yet survived as a pre-Reformation movement of dissent.

### **John Wyclif (c1329-1384)**

Wyclif was an academic rather than a revolutionary, an establishment man rather than a radical, who seems to have had no intention of launching a movement that would challenge the religious and political status quo. His criticisms of the church were accompanied by calls for reform rather than the development of an alternative church, and he remained a member of the established church throughout his life. But his views inspired the first dissident movement of any consequence in England.

Wyclif was a philosopher as well as a theologian, and many of his earlier writings are concerned with complex metaphysical issues as he entered into contemporary debates. In his later writings, he concentrated more on ecclesiastical abuses that concerned him and developed strongly anticlerical views. His writings were not intended to foment social unrest or to promulgate political ideas, but his opponents certainly feared that they might have this effect. Most of the things he said were not new, but his academic reputation and the force with which he wrote gave his views a special significance.

The publicity given to Wyclif's views aroused the concern of the church authorities, and attempts were made to convict him of heresy and to silence him. But the support of many powerful friends protected Wyclif and enabled him to continue propagating increasingly trenchant criticisms and radical views until his death.

### **Wyclif and the Lollards**

The nature of the relationship between Wyclif and the Lollards is not easy to assess. One of the practical initiatives he suggested in his later writings was the training and commissioning of 'poor preachers', laymen whose task was to teach the Scriptures throughout the land. Wyclif's expressed intention was not to start a new movement or to plant new churches, but simply to fill what he saw as a gap in the established churches. His preachers were to work alongside the parish priests, preaching, teaching and evangelising. Another initiative with important consequences was Wyclif's determination to provide a bible in the English language for his preachers and their hearers. At least some of Wyclif's own writings during the final period of his life were also in the vernacular, rather than Latin, consistent with his concern that the discussion of theology should not be restricted to priests and academics. Some of these writings helped to inspire the developing Lollard movement.

The groups that emerged during Wyclif's final years and proliferated after his death quite quickly became known as the Lollards. This word probably derived from a word meaning

‘to mumble’ and referred either to their practice of learning and reciting Scripture or to their praying. An alternative possibility is the derivation of the term from ‘lollers’, meaning idle loafers.

### **The Lollard Movement**

Whatever the direct influence of Wyclif on the movement, Lollards owed much to Wyclif’s ideas, even if they knew them only in a simplified form. He provided them with ammunition to launch a powerful assault on the established churches: it was a small step from denouncing the clergy to the idea of the priesthood of all believers.

After Wyclif’s death, Lollard groups spread rapidly. The Oxford leaders – Nicholas Hereford, John Aston, Philip Repton, Robert Winston and John Ashwardby – travelled widely and wrote extensively, building up a substantial following. Under their leadership radical ideas were translated from academic to popular circles and the Lollard movement emerged as a loose-knit but identifiable phenomenon.

The academic and clerical leaders were joined by many lay evangelists, who often dressed in russet tunics and walked barefoot. Most were from the poorer sections of society, their greatest strength being among urban and rural artisans, especially those who had recently become literate and were open to new ideas. Lollard beliefs spread through public preaching, distribution of Bibles and tracts, and invitations to friends to join ‘reading circles’, where the Bible was studied and radical ideas discussed.

Lollard preaching called for personal responsibility rather than passive acceptance of clerical authority and expressed the doubts that were more widely felt about some of the seemingly superstitious and biblically unwarranted beliefs and practices of the church. Making available portions of the Bible in the vernacular enabled the Lollards to demonstrate the lack of biblical support for such beliefs and practices.

The authorities were alarmed by the spread of this movement, especially in light of recent peasant unrest, and steps were taken to arrest it. But no co-ordinated strategy was adopted to check the popular spread of the movement. Many bishops were slow to respond and found Lollard groups deeply rooted in their dioceses by the time they were ready to take action. Lollard leaders enjoyed widespread popular support – and protection from influential landowners – which made ecclesiastical action less easy. Secular authorities, though concerned about peasant unrest and possible Lollard complicity in this, were not unduly bothered about ecclesiastical disputes.

From 1401, opponents of the Lollards had been authorised to use burning for relapsed and impenitent heretics. But in England, there was reticence about using torture and burning to stamp out heresies, and the Lollards profited from this welcome restraint. Those arrested were generally given ample time to recant and the authorities wanted to convert them back to the established churches, rather than execute them.

But in 1413 this changed. Sir John Oldcastle, a baron, was the most distinguished secular Lollard leader. He began to gather support for an armed rebellion, presumably to impose Lollard reforms on church and nation. This was betrayed to the authorities before it could be carried out. But this incident revealed how far Lollardy had spread and finally roused both official and public opinion against the Lollards. Oldcastle was caught and executed, and others involved in the rebellion were hanged. Various Lollard groups were discovered and their members prosecuted, now that the bishops and secular authorities could rely on their outraged neighbours to betray them.

The following years were marked by efforts by secular and ecclesiastical authorities to stamp out the movement, although gradually the repression became less severe. It was clear that the Lollards would survive, if at all, only as an underground movement. Throughout the fifteenth century efforts were made to root them out, but, as memories of the revolts faded, there was less enthusiasm for such actions.

In the 1450s, during a lull in action against them, Lollards began again to evangelise and plant new groups. The reading circles were still influential means of attracting new adherents, and the authorities were unsuccessful in their efforts to restrict the production and distribution of Lollard literature and vernacular versions of the Bible. Lollard beliefs were passed down within families and through trade contacts. Sermons were written down and distributed to adherents and to interested enquirers. Lollard schools were also operating to instruct members of the movement.

Most Lollard groups operated in the southern part of England, although there were groups as far north as Newcastle. Seven areas have been identified as the main centres of Lollard activity in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: Kent, London, the Chilterns, Essex, Bristol, Coventry and East Anglia.

### **Lollard Beliefs**

Though there was no uniformity of belief in such a loose-knit movement, there was broad agreement within the movement on many issues throughout its history.

- Personal Responsibility/Biblical Authority

In an age when people expected to let the priests do their thinking for them in matters of religion, the Lollards encouraged the development of personal Bible study, taught reliance on the Holy Spirit as guide, and urged members to reach independent decisions on matters of faith rather than accepting ecclesiastical opinions and dogmas.

- Rejection of Superstition

Lollards used their new English versions of the Bible to contrast the simplicity of the early church with the formalism and complexity of contemporary church life. They rejected anything they perceived as superstitious rather than authentically Christian, including doctrines such as purgatory and transubstantiation and practices such as prayers

for the dead. They rejected pilgrimages as a waste of time and a money-making scheme for the priests. Simple rational explanations held greater appeal for them than elements of mystery and symbolism.

- The Priesthood of All Believers

The distinction between clergy and laity was crucial in the established churches, with the laity being largely passive. But Lollards rejected this distinction, and their anti-clerical stance found a ready welcome among many who were already critical of a privileged and corrupt clergy. Many Lollards advocated withholding tithes from such clerics. They rejected the authority of the Pope and the Church as an institution and replaced this with the authority of the Bible interpreted within their communities. The true church was a congregation of true believers. Although there are instances of Lollard groups ordaining their own priests, generally they were committed to the priesthood of all believers, with lay people involved in all aspects of religious life, including preaching, hearing confessions informally, and officiating at the Eucharist.

- The Sacraments

Lollards stressed a common sense approach to faith and applied this to issues such as communion, where it seemed obvious that the bread remained bread, whatever the metaphysical explanations behind the traditional dogmas. Transubstantiation was regarded as a recent and perverted development contrary to the teachings of the orthodox creeds. Anti-clericalism led naturally to the rejection of ordination and some opposed priestly celibacy. They valued marriage but some taught that no priestly involvement was needed to witness a marriage. Financial and anti-ceremonial views coincided in the rejection of the need for extreme unction or burial in consecrated ground. In some areas, infant baptism was held to be as acceptable in a ditch as in a font, or rejected altogether, on the grounds that infants were redeemed by Christ in any case and did not need to be sprinkled with supposedly holy water.

- Ethical Perspectives

There was a strong moral component in the Lollards' teaching. The book of James, with its practical ethical teaching, was popular. They criticised the low standards among ordinary parishioners and clergy (especially their sexual misdemeanours and social insensitivity). They called for repentance, discipleship, simplicity of life and concern for the poor. On specific issues there was diversity of opinion. Some groups followed Wyclif's view that war might be justified but other means were preferable; others held a pacifist view and opposed participation in war, making weapons, capital punishment, and self-defence when attacked; others again were willing to support John Oldcastle in his attempt to overthrow the government. Some taught that tithing had no New Testament support and should not be practised; others held that tithing was voluntary and that tithes should not be paid to unworthy priests. Some opposed the swearing of oaths as contrary to the teaching of Jesus; others held that oaths should be avoided where possible but were legitimate to save lives.

- Mission

Lollard preachers were a mission band that contrasted sharply with the maintenance orientation of the parish priests and the monks. Unlike the settled leadership of parish priests, Lollard leaders moved from place to place in order to spread the message and establish new groups. Furthermore, mission was not restricted to preachers but was the responsibility of all members. The spread of the movement relied upon this every-member evangelism, as new converts were made through house-to-house visitation, public evangelism, preaching in fairs and markets, conversations over meals in homes, passing on tracts and invitations to reading circles. Lollard preachers sometimes interrupted church services to preach, or persuaded local priests to surrender their pulpits to them. By the middle of the fifteenth century, it seems that the charismatic itinerant leaders had largely given way to less colourful figures who travelled between the communities, carrying books and greetings rather than initiating new activities, and that mission now mainly comprised the quiet evangelising of local communities.

## The Waldensians

### Valdes and the Early Waldensians

In 1174, a French businessman in Lyons, Valdes, was challenged by the radical teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and responded by committing himself to a life of voluntary poverty and preaching. He experienced a dramatic conversion, renounced his previous business practices, threw his money out into the street, and after running a soup kitchen during the famine of 1176, began a new life as an itinerant preacher.

There had been other wandering preachers in the Middle Ages who had acted in a similar way. What was different about Valdes, apart from being a layman, was his concern to have the Bible translated into the local dialect, and his success in gathering a group of followers, drawn from different social classes, but sharing a life of poverty and preaching. Their preaching and the provision of a Bible people could understand led the formation of a lay association, known as the 'Poor in Spirit'. Taking Jesus' sending out of the Seventy as their pattern, they formed apostolic missionary bands, wore rough clothes and sandals and went around preaching a message of repentance.

They had no intention of separating from the Catholic Church. They simply wanted to live as whole-hearted followers of Jesus. But the challenge of their simple lifestyle, the popularity of this new movement and their unauthorised preaching aroused local opposition. They were in breach of canon law that restricted doctrinal preaching to the clergy. Valdes appealed for permission to preach. The Pope, while approving their motives and vows of poverty, insisted were not to preach unless invited by local clergy. They must remain within the discipline of the established church. But, as they grew more aware of the corruption of the church, they continued their unauthorised preaching and began to face trouble. The archbishop of Lyons excommunicated the movement in 1181 and expelled them from the area under his jurisdiction. In 1184, they were included in a papal decree against dangerous heretics and became subject to anti-heresy legislation, despite lack of evidence that they were unorthodox. But repression was patchy, depending on the interest of the authorities.

Meanwhile, through planned missions and enforced expulsion, Waldensian groups were established in new areas. They won converts from all social classes, including some wealthy citizens, priests, monks and nuns, and their egalitarian stance towards women attracted many to the movement, as well as further provoking hostility. By 1198 some authorities took firm action, including the imposition of the death penalty on those who refused to recant, though in many places persecution was still sporadic. Furthermore, their missionaries reached Lombardy and began to make common cause with another radical group, the Humiliati, benefiting from the atmosphere of freedom and anti-cleric feeling in that area, and establishing congregations and schools.

Gradually tensions appeared within the movement. Valdes hoped for reconciliation with the Catholic Church and having a reforming influence in it. More radical groups, in Lombardy and elsewhere, were challenged many areas of Catholic teaching and practice.

Some seemed determined to form new churches. In 1205, a serious split occurred between the French and Italian branches of the movement. The 'Poor of Lyons' followed Valdes. The 'Poor Lombards', the group that emerged from the Humiliati and Waldensian groups in Lombardy, gradually separated from them.

Ineffective attempts to deal with Waldensians were replaced in the thirteenth century by a more discerning approach. Innocent III, who became Pope in 1198, distinguished between the genuinely heretical or schismatic, and those whose discontent with the Church had caused them to pull away from Catholicism. The former were pursued vigorously; the latter were wooed back to the Church by making concessions and creating space for their activities within its structures. Some Lyonists were reconciled to the Catholic Church, as were some Humiliati.

Meanwhile, contact between the French and Italian branches continued and there were sporadic attempts to bring about reconciliation. A final attempt was made in 1218. Six representatives from each group met near Bergamo. Disagreements were discussed at length and the conference foundered on the issue of the validity of the sacraments and the role of the celebrant. But the division represented the different perspectives of a group still wanting to see the established church reformed and a group that had given up and was committed to building an alternative church.

### **Later Waldensians**

French Waldensians enjoyed peace and freedom in many areas of the country until the 1230s. Persecution increased then, however, driving the movement underground and detaching its less committed members. Numbers fell steadily during this century, and early in the next century, inquisitors found few traces of the movement in its area of origin. Waldensians survived by retreating into quietism or into the mountains, where they formed communities that were too remote to bother the authorities. In Italy, the Lombards too found themselves under increasing pressure and unable to establish an alternative church. Gradually, they withdrew and took refuge in rural areas in the south of Italy or further north in the Alpine valleys. These losses in the heartlands were more than compensated for numerically by the growth of the movement in other areas. During most of the thirteenth century, both groups of Waldensians spread, into Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Poland and Spain.

By the start of the fifteenth century, Waldensians in France and Italy seemed to be in terminal decline, a beleaguered minority of Alpine peasants in remote valleys and small communities scattered throughout other parts of France. Only in the Piedmont area did Waldensians experience significant growth. Persecution was less intense than before, but there were periods of severe pressure. The response of the Waldensian communities varied. Usually, they tried to hide and avoid confrontation; occasionally, they resorted to violence. In 1487 a determined campaign against Waldensians was launched, which resulted in executions, emigration and the return of some to the Catholic Church. The survival of the movement into the sixteenth century was the result of the resilience of

small groups and the courage and faithfulness of travelling leaders who continued to visit these isolated communities.

In the fifteenth century, German-speaking Waldensians were also an underground movement, surviving through a combination of outward conformity and quiet but tenacious transmission of beliefs within families to subsequent generations. But in Bohemia, and then Moravia, reform ideas were circulating and a new movement was emerging. Influenced by the writings of John Wyclif, but energised also by nationalist stirrings, the movement became associated with Jan Hus, rector of the Bethlehem chapel in Prague. The Hussite reform movement encouraged and breathed new life into the Waldensian groups who came into contact with it.

By the start of the sixteenth century, much of the heat had gone out of the conflict in the Alps. Waldensians had survived, in Italy, France and various German-speaking areas. By the end of this century, the Waldensian movement was absorbed into the Reformation. Exhausted by centuries of repression, it gratefully received the leadership and new energies of Protestantism. From the 1560s the emergence of the Waldensian Church, rather than a loosely linked movement, can be dated, a church which continues to provide an alternative to Catholicism in Italy and elsewhere.

### **Waldensian Beliefs**

An 800-year history presents difficulties in trying to set out the beliefs and practices of the Waldensians. These were not uniform everywhere or throughout the centuries, but there are some common features.

- Anti-clericalism

Waldensians preached a simple message of repentance, individual responsibility and holy living. They criticised the corruption of the clergy and denied that such men should be trusted. Instead they endorsed lay Bible study. The movement was marked by deep love for the Bible and passionate desire to understand and obey it. They were committed to a 'believers' church ecclesiology, where the local congregation ordered its life together, and they were determined to submit to biblical authority alone.

- Church Structure

There was emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, men and women. The role of the preachers was crucial for the movement, but these leaders were not ordained, nor generally regarded as belonging to a separate class of Christians, nor ranked in any kind of hierarchy. They were committed to a life of celibacy, travelling and poverty, dependent for their support on the gifts of members of the movement. Once trained, they were sent out in pairs to visit scattered groups. Those who were not preachers remained in their homes and jobs, devoting time to Bible study and nurturing their faith in secret. They collected support for the preachers, ran training schools in their homes and, where they could, tried to draw others into the movement.

- Ethical Integrity

They were not interested in speculative theology or doctrinal issues, but in spirituality and ethics. They called people to follow Jesus and obey his teachings. They advocated personal integrity, simple lifestyle and rejection of greed and excess. They opposed all forms of lying and deception. They also generally rejected the swearing of oaths. And usually they practised what they preached.

- Non-violence

Early Waldensians were committed to non-violence, deriving this emphasis from a literal reading of the Gospels. They spoke out against violence: crusades against infidels and warfare in general; killing Jews; execution of thieves who were caught stealing food for their families in times of famine; capital punishment; and coercion in matters of faith. This instinctive non-violence persisted through the centuries, though there are instances of Waldensians resorting to violence. Generally, this was provoked by repression, or the threat presented by defectors who might betray them, and was regarded as necessary to defend homes and family. Occasionally, there seem to have been attempts to use violence for political ends, as a form of revolutionary action.

- Rejection of Superstition

Waldensians discovered that some familiar Catholic practices had no biblical basis. Gradually they removed these practices from their churches in order to cut back their church life to the simpler pattern they found in the New Testament. They rejected prayers for the dead, regarded indulgences as benefiting greedy priests and challenged the doctrine of Purgatory. They rejected official fast days and refused to bow before altars, venerate crosses or treat as special holy bread or water. Somewhat surprisingly, many retained devotion to Mary, despite the teachings of their leaders.

- The Sacraments

They regarded communion as a remembrance, not a sacrifice, and allowed all to take bread and wine. They rejected the theology of the Mass and were dubious about the idea of transubstantiation. Initially many continued to receive communion from the priests, but increasingly communion was celebrated in their homes without clerical involvement. On baptism, there was uncertainty. They were not fully convinced infant baptism was biblical or appropriate, but they seem rarely to have abandoned it.

- Confession

The importance of confessing sins, doing penance and receiving absolution was retained throughout the movement. Although some continued to confess to the Catholic priests, in many places their low view of priests precluded these as suitable candidates to hear confession. The natural alternative was the travelling preachers, and they certainly

performed this role, but the underlying conviction that all believers were priests allowed the development of the practice of confession to one another.

- Mission

A remarkable feature of the movement was its determination to continue pressing ahead despite sustained pressure and opposition. Only in the darkest periods was its energies taken up with survival. At other times missionaries travelled across Europe, risking their lives to spread their convictions. Sometimes new churches were planted. In other places seeds lay dormant for years until watered by similar ideas brought by the Hussites in Bohemia or the Reformers or Anabaptists in central Europe. Much of the evangelism must have been cautious and through quiet conversations, since any form of public witnessing would have incurred severe penalties. There are accounts of evangelists operating as door-to-door salesmen, offering various goods and then referring to more valuable treasures, which could be revealed if the local clergy were not informed about the visit. Where there was a positive response, the gospel would be explained and invitations given to join a study group.

## **Evangelising by Force**

**Richard Fletcher: *The Barbarian Conversion* (University of California Press, 1999):**

“In 744 [Charles Martel’s] son invaded the fringes of Saxony and subdued its people: ‘Christ being our leader, many of them were baptized’. The association between military submission and Christian baptism is notable in...comments by a contemporary chronicler...it was characteristic of the Frankish *Adelskirche* that a bishop might be an active participant on the field of battle...The stage was set for the bloody Saxon wars and forcible conversions of the reign of Charlemagne.”

“The aged Lul composed, shortly before his death in 786, Latin verses celebrating the conquest and forcible conversion of the Saxons...*The Saxon Capitulary* ...records the measures taken for the Christianization of Saxony. Refusal to be baptized became a capital offence.”

**Christopher Columbus (in a petition to the Spanish king and queen):**

“I hope in our Lord that Your Highnesses will determine to send priests in great diligence in order to unite to the Church such great populations and to convert them, just as Your Highnesses have destroyed those who were unwilling to confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

**Columbus’ son (reporting on a skirmish in the Caribbean in 1495):**

“The soldiers mowed down dozens with point-blank volleys, loosed the dogs to rip open limbs and bellies, chased fleeing Indians into the bush to skewer them with sword and pike, and with God’s aid soon gained a complete victory.”

**An anonymous 16<sup>th</sup> century conquistador:**

“Who can deny that the use of gunpowder against pagans is the burning of incense to our Lord?”

**German chancellor von Capri (surveying a German colony in 1890):**

“We should begin by establishing a few stations in the interior, from which both the merchant and the missionary can operate; gun and Bible should go hand in hand.”

## **A Decade of Evangelism**

Ten years of tremendous progress for the gospel. Thousands swept into the kingdom of God. Towns and villages turned upside down as visiting preachers call for repentance and offer the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Scenes of revival with healings and miracles, tears and deep conviction. Heightened expectancy of the return of Jesus and renewed commitment to mission and radical discipleship. New churches planted all over Europe. Ordinary men and women living extraordinary lives, gossiping the gospel, sharing their possessions, taking the Bible seriously, loving each other and loving their enemies.

This decade of evangelism, which began in 1525 with the first believers' baptism in Zurich, was spontaneous and uncoordinated. In common with many periods of revival, there were unwise and extreme developments. There also was widespread and official opposition. Apostles and evangelists burned themselves out in short but powerful ministries before being caught and executed. The decade produced hundreds of martyrs and ended in 1535 with the disaster of Munster, when an attempt was made to establish a "New Jerusalem" by force.

### **Challenging a thousand years of Christendom**

During that decade a new understanding of evangelism emerged that challenged the assumptions of a thousand years of Christendom. Christendom was assumed that the entire populace (except for Jews) was automatically Christian. This led to baptism of citizens before they were old enough to express a choice, violent suppression of heresy and dissent, and definition of the mission of the church as pastoral care rather than evangelism. Anabaptists dissented from this approach, and declared that Europe needed evangelism. They put church planting back on the agenda, made mission the primary task of the church, and disturbed nominal Christianity with a call to discipleship.

Over 450 years have passed since that decade. Today the social, economic and spiritual context of western culture is different. Preaching in the open air and baptising believers no longer invites execution. Church planting is on the agenda of the established churches. The Anabaptist view of Europe as a non-Christian society in need of evangelising is no longer rejected as heretical and treasonous.

What relevance, then, might Anabaptist perspectives on evangelism have for the present Decade of Evangelism in England? We could honour the insights and courage of those early Anabaptist evangelists. We could remind those who look to Reformation teaching on *sola scriptura* and justification by faith that 'mainline' Reformers practised neither evangelism nor church planting. We might rejoice that Anabaptist pleas for religious tolerance and free choice in matters of faith ultimately did not fall on death ears. But are there other lessons to be learned? What does evangelism in the 'radical tradition' look like?

## Evangelism as an invitation to choose

We could start with the Anabaptist understanding of evangelism as an invitation to choose a new way of living under the lordship of Jesus Christ and in fellowship with his community of 'resident aliens' (1 Peter 2:11).<sup>1</sup> This understanding has several implications:

1. *Inviting people to choose to follow Jesus implies that other choices are possible and that invitees are free to reject the invitation.* There is nothing inconsistent in Christians engaging in enthusiastic efforts to persuade people to follow Jesus and at the same time defending their right to make other choices. We do not need to believe those other options are right to support the principle of freedom to choose. We need to be sensitive on this issue. The memory of adherents of other faiths justifiably are wary of a 'Decade of Evangelism' if churches do not defend religious freedom as wholeheartedly as they proclaim the gospel. Understanding evangelism as an invitation to choose affirms that it is vital to issue the invitation, but to do so in an environment where people can respond without pressure or inducement.

2. *Understanding evangelism as an invitation to adopt a new way of living under the lordship of Jesus Christ precludes any attempt to drive a wedge between evangelism and social action.* A focus on the lordship of Jesus requires both those issuing the invitation and those receiving it to consider the implications of his lordship for all aspects of life. The church's proclamation is not only that Jesus is *Lord*, but that *Jesus* is Lord. Inviting people to adopt a new lifestyle rather than simply assenting to a creed or enjoying a spiritual experience presents hope for transformation of this world as well as salvation in the next. The sixteenth-century Anabaptist Hans Denck declared, 'No one can know Christ unless he follow after him in life.'

Our invitation must make clear that those who respond to Jesus are embarking on a journey, not arriving at a destination. Evangelists are responsible for giving clear enough directions to distinguish this 'way' from others. They make clear the cost involved but do not presume to know all that it means to live under the lordship of Jesus. Those who respond are free to discover this, in company with other travellers, rather than being under the illusion that they have already arrived. Anabaptist writings frequently express openness to fresh revelation and new understandings of discipleship.

3. *Understanding evangelism as inviting people to join a community of 'resident aliens' implies that the shape of the church is crucial to its mission.* The invitation to follow Jesus goes out from a context that includes the lifestyle and relationships that the church models. The church, as a provisional representation of the kingdom, enables people to see 'what they are getting into' as they consider the invitation of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> For a provocative discussion of the "alien" status of Christians in the world, see Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)

The New Testament expects the message of the cross to offend people (1 Cor. 1:23). Jesus was not surprised when his teaching and lifestyle caused offence (Matt. 11:6). But many are offended by the church for quite different reasons. When the church fails to demonstrate a new way of living, when it seems almost indistinguishable from society as a whole, when practice falls far short of its preaching, then the invitation to choose loses its integrity and winsomeness. Evangelism becomes little more than a recruiting drive in a consumer society where many institutions are competing for new members.

Humility is an important component in evangelism. The church, even at its most faithful, remains an imperfect demonstration of the new way of living. We cannot postpone evangelism until the church reaches perfection. But evangelism can go hand in hand with a determination to continue reforming both the shape of the church and the message it proclaims, consistent to the New Testament pattern.

### **‘Christian’ society domesticated the gospel**

Until recently, people in nations regarded as ‘Christian’ gave little thought to the relationship between the gospel and surrounding culture. Roots of this situation go back to the fourth century, when emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and gave the church privilege and power. In subsequent centuries the church became confident that its language, ideas and ceremonies made sense to most members of society. Evangelism in this setting seemed to require little explanation of the gospel. It concentrated on urging a more wholehearted response to a message that most people supposedly already understood.

Lack of distinction between church and society in this Constantinian experiment seriously compromised and domesticated what the church proclaimed. Those responding to this abbreviated gospel only had to make small, usually negative, adjustments to their lifestyle. The ‘good news’ lacked newsworthiness. It communicated neither hope nor challenge, and certainly offended no one. Far from inviting people to choose a radically new way of living among a countercultural company of resident aliens, the church preached a message that encouraged people to express their faith by living as good citizens within the established order. Few considered the possibility that loyalty to Jesus and his new community might at times be in conflict with loyalty to family, class or nation. Determined to fulfil a priestly rather than prophetic role in society, the church marginalised the subversive potential of the gospel.

If the church continues to perceive itself as a social institution rather than as a countercultural alternative and a community of resident aliens, it will be unable to grapple with a contemporary society that is no longer ‘Christian.’ The basic assumption of post-Christian society is that the gospel is a boring reaffirmation of *status quo* values, and that evangelism is an invitation to add a religious veneer to one's life as a guarantee of preferential treatment beyond the grave. Many evangelistic sermons reinforce this assumption.

## **New language and new images of Jesus**

We need to find new images and ways of expressing the gospel which will cross the cultural barriers between the church and various groups which now make up a multi-faceted society. To communicate effectively, the church needs to listen much more. What questions are people in our society asking? What are the issues to which the gospel has something to say? What concepts within the rich tapestry of biblical teaching communicate hope and freedom? We will need to preach a different message to different communities rather than giving a standard pre-packaging sermon.

Preaching a different message may mean:

- Talking about liberation rather than personal fulfilment, reconciliation rather than justification, transformation rather than stability.
- Drawing on different ways of explaining the work of Christ rather than the familiar penal substitution approach.
- Focusing on hope rather than faith.
- Presenting the gospel with an emphasis on social supernatural factors rather than on moral or intellectual ones.
- Announcing good news to the poor and powerless, and judgement to the rich and powerful.
- Being specific about certain sins in some communities and different sins in others.
- Bringing good news to the sinned-against as well as to the sinners.
- Explaining rather than exhorting, persuading rather than pronouncing, inviting rather than indoctrinating.
- Adopting or reclaiming terminology used by others ('new age', 'enlightenment', 'friends of the earth', 'revolution') rather than shying away from such concepts.

Preaching a new message will *not* mean diluting the gospel to make it more acceptable. The Constantinian experiment shows that requiring minimum commitment in order to keep maximum number of adherents ultimately is a self-defeating policy. The church can expand until it is society-wide by preaching an undemanding gospel, but only at the expense of unfaithfulness to Jesus' call to be salt and light.

The church invites people to adopt a new lifestyle that both affirms and challenges their present culture. Only a church community of 'resident aliens' is sufficiently detached from the prevailing culture to do this without simply imposing a 'Christian' culture or denigrating other 'non-Christian' elements. The church can proclaim a message which is both 'good' and 'news' if it refuses to separate evangelism from prophecy and is ready to confront all kinds of oppression, however deeply embedded. The gospel message can respect a variety of cultures in society and decline to sanctify or demonize any of these.

## **We present Jesus, not just a lifestyle**

Above all, the church must rediscover how to present Jesus to people, and trust his ability to win their allegiance. We cannot just present Jesus the saviour from guilt, nor Jesus

who gives meaning to the lives of the comfortable and bored, nor Jesus whose lordship refers only to a limited range of personal moral decisions. We cannot just present the establishment Jesus who represents order and stability rather than justice and change, who appears to the powerful and privileged for all the wrong reasons. We also must proclaim Jesus the friend of the poor, the defender of the powerless, the reconciler of communities, the one who surprises, the freedom fighter, the breaker of chains, the pioneer, the protester, the peacemaker.

How can the Anabaptists help us proclaim good news in our generation? By challenging our emasculated ideas of Jesus, our forensic concepts of salvation, our individualistic versions of discipleship, and our conformist approaches to social and ethical issues; by helping us realise that the Christendom heritage distorts our message and alienates those we are trying to evangelise; by encouraging us to explore alternatives and to be open to fresh understandings of the gospel.

# Anabaptists and the Great Commission

By Darren Blaney

'Evangelism isn't working!' proclaims the back cover of the latest Christian paperback I am reading. To be honest, very few would disagree. The success of *Alpha* aside, the Decade of Evangelism was in fact another Decade of Decline. So as a pastor struggling to make the good news known in an apathetic and negative culture, what am I to do? Not surprisingly, my mind goes back to the Anabaptists. Whatever problems they may have struggled with, lack of impact was not one of them.

What was the secret of their success in evangelism? What can we learn from them about spreading the good news today? That is what I will explore in two articles. In the first, I will review the particular role the Great Commission played in shaping Anabaptism. In the second, I will review some of the methods they used in evangelism, and what we might learn from them for today.

## The role of the Great Commission

There can be no doubt that the Great Commission was a foundational text for the Anabaptists.

No words of the Master were given more serious attention by his Anabaptist followers than his final command. (Littell, 1984:18)

So central was the Great Commission to the total life of the Anabaptists that it became a key factor to enhance their understanding of history and the world, the church and the kingdom, discipleship and witness.  
(Kasdorf, 1984:52)

It has been widely assumed by scholars that the Great Commission functioned as the Anabaptists' prime motivation for mission. However, as Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk points out, this belief has recently been questioned. Instead of the Great Commission:

Critics believe the source of Anabaptist mission to lie deep in the nature of the church as the community which incarnates the life of Jesus as expressed in the socio-religious reality of the Anabaptist movement itself. (Shenk, 1993:7)

Or, put in simple terms, it was *the way that they lived church as a community* that made them so effective, rather than their passion for the Great Commission.

How are we to evaluate this debate?

It is clear that the Great Commission featured in many key Anabaptist writings. It is also true that there was no apparent mention of it at the 1527 Augsburg Missionary Synod.

This is surprising if it was indeed the movement's prime mission motivator. It is also clear that the majority of the uses of the Great Commission in Anabaptist writings were to defend believer's baptism, not to argue for mission (as is the case, for instance, in the foundational Schleithem Confession). This might lead one to conclude that the Great Commission was mainly a church-order text for the Anabaptists, rather than a mission one.

A possible historical reconstruction might help us find a way forward in this debate. The first Anabaptists in Zurich became convinced of the rightness of adult/believer's baptism from their study of Scripture. This issue became the focus of their debate with the Reformers, because it was the prime example of a wider controversy: Who had the ultimate authority for the reforming of the church? Was it the state, through the city council, or was it Jesus Christ, through the Bible? (Although this might appear simplistic, it is clearly how the Anabaptists saw things.) Thus it was natural that, in developing their argument, the Anabaptists would look for key Bible texts that they believed established their view on believer's baptism. These they claimed to have found in the Great Commissions of Matthew 28 and Mark 16.

Historian Franklin Littell illustrates their approach by reference to several early Anabaptists. For example, there is the record from 1527 of Hans Spitemair, who paraphrased and interpreted Christ's command as:

Go forth into the whole world and preach the Gospel; whosoever believes and is baptised the same shall be saved; for the preaching of God's word shall go before and not after the baptism ... (Littell, 1984:19)

Then there are the comments of Hans Hut:

Firstly, Christ said, go forth into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature. Secondly, he said, whosoever believes, thirdly – and is baptised, the same shall be saved. This order must be maintained if a true Christianity is to be erected. (Littell, 1984:19)

It is clear what is happening in these contexts. In turning repeatedly to the Great Commissions of Matthew 28 and Mark 16 for justification of their baptismal views, the first Anabaptists were also, unavoidably, being shaped by the missionary implications of these texts. For them the Great Commission began *to link together, inextricably, both church order and mission*. As Shenk puts it:

The Great Commission is the key ecclesiological statement in the Gospels, thereby requiring that ecclesiology always be interpreted missionally and mission always be interpreted ecclesially. (Shenk, 1993:8)

Or, in my terms, if you work from the Great Commission, then you cannot think church without thinking mission, and you cannot think mission without thinking church!

## **Did the Anabaptists realise they had a missionary understanding of church?**

However, beyond being unavoidably shaped by such texts, is there any evidence that the Anabaptists came to a settled, conscious theological position that linked mission and church? Yes there is.

In many of the writings and recorded testimonies of Swiss, Hutterite and South German Anabaptists there emerges an interesting and common approach; namely, to interpret the Great Commission through the baptismal passages of Acts.

Thus, we have seen, Peter's Pentecost sermon became the grid through which the great commission was interpreted by the Anabaptists ... one cannot help but be struck by how widespread – from ministers to the commonest brother and sister – this interpretation had penetrated to the very core of ... Anabaptism. (Friesen, 1998:5-6)

Put another way, Abraham Friesen argues that *the Anabaptists saw the church of Acts 2 as God's intended way of obeying the command of Matthew 28!* He believes that it was this one thing that gave Swiss, South German and Hutterite Anabaptism its distinctive shape. Thus 'being church' was the best way of 'doing mission'.

How did this interpretive approach come about? Access to the Scriptures for many of the Anabaptists would have been through Erasmus' paraphrase of the New Testament, in particular his *Paraphrases of the Gospel of Matthew and the Acts of the Apostles*. Acts 2, with Peter's call to repent and be baptised, was probably a favourite proof text for the Anabaptists. In Erasmus' *Paraphrase* the baptismal passages from Acts occur in close proximity to the end of Matthew's Gospel (and thus the Great Commission). Further, Friesen believes that this Great Commission/Acts 'grid' is clearly present in Erasmus' footnotes in *Paraphrase*. Once again Erasmus had laid an egg, this time for the Radical Reformers to hatch it.

Thus we have another strand through which the Great Commission caused church identity and evangelism to become indivisibly linked for the Anabaptists.

### **Believer's baptism: a missionary sacrament**

Finally, we must also consider the world-view consequences that committing themselves to believer's baptism would have had for those first Anabaptists. By rejecting infant baptism they were effectively rejecting the Christian status of most of the population! Thus a change of doctrine had the consequence of forming a new lens through which they saw their society. This had the effect of creating a mission field on their doorstep overnight. Thus believer's baptism by itself was an inherently missionary force within Anabaptism.

So it was their understanding of the Great Commission, their radical community life, and their commitment to believer's baptism that made the Anabaptists so committed to evangelism. Further, in their minds all three of these were inseparably linked together

because of their particular Scriptural basis for believer's baptism. And the place where these three strands interweave, the focus of Anabaptist missionary commitment, is found in their reading of Acts 2 in the light of the Great Commission.

So what does all this mean for me here in Gillingham, Kent, in 2002? I offer the following thoughts.

**1. My understanding of church is a mess.** When I did my first theology course at a Baptist college, the class followed the general outline of a popular systematic theology book, written by a Baptist. I have a copy here before me as I write. The section on the church has about 40 pages, with four sections and fourteen sub-sections. Evangelism merits less than one and a half pages, and the Great Commission hardly gets a mention. (I am given to understand that a popular evangelical Anglican systematic theology has only one page on mission.) I simply make the point that my understanding of church is decidedly unmissionary in its actual essence. Far too many of us no longer *think* church from an Acts-2-as-the-outworking-of-the-Great-Commission perspective. We are still rooted in church as Sunday-worship-event. We are not Anabaptist. What difference would it make if I really took this Matthew 28/Acts 2 approach seriously? (And how could I implement it?)

**2. The missionary nature of believer's baptism.** The Anglican missionary thinker Robert Warren is keen that the Church of England should recover the baptismal identity of every believer. He speaks of baptism as: 'the commissioning of the laity into the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry of Christ' (Warren, 1995:25). Such a concept does not seem to sit easily with that of infant baptism. However, it is one that Anabaptist evangelist Hans Hut would heartily have approved of. His practice was to baptise converts using a standard liturgical formula that included the commissioning of the new believer to obey the Great Commission, preach the gospel and baptise others.

I find myself pondering how this compares to my understanding of baptism. I baptise people *upon* their profession of faith, but do I baptise them *into* the Great Commission? Do I baptise them into discipleship? Do I baptise them into the ongoing prophetic and priestly ministry of Christ to society? Do I cover this in my preparation classes, my baptismal liturgy or my general preaching and teaching? Or am I merely practising Christening with adults?

**3. Believer's baptism and my frustrations.** So I find myself asking: Am I missing something here? As a pastor I tend to be a bit soft on believer's baptism. What really counts, I find myself thinking, is faith in Christ. This seems in keeping with today's tendency whereby people are baptised 'when they feel it's right'. Sometimes this is years after their conversion. Added to which, my church runs what amounts to an open membership policy, where no baptism of any sort is necessary. *What difference is this drawing between the world and the Christian disciple?*

The radical nature of conversion, the cost of discipleship, the counter-cultural path of submission to Christ and each other, the marking out of the believer as separate from sin

and the world – surely I am selling out all these with my softly, softly, approach? I'm really saying, 'Just a little faith is all you need. Nothing too odd or costly about that, is there?' I am not sure that that is a fair paraphrase of 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand'. Is it a wonder that I am frustrated by the lack of interest in the gospel or the church? We are told that the idea of church membership is dead. Is it? Or is it that we have lost an understanding of church rooted in the Great Commission that inextricably links baptism, church, discipleship and mission?

In my second article I will explore some specific practical outworkings of Anabaptist evangelism. However, as this article seeks to make clear, methods were not the secret of Anabaptism. No new method will change our situation either. Only a radical paradigm shift in our understanding of church will move us forward.

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# Anabaptists and Evangelism

By Darren Blaney

In my previous article I reflected on the role the Great Commission played as both a motivating force for evangelism and theological centre within Anabaptism. Lest I gave the impression that all Anabaptist evangelism was an attraction through their community life I will dwell this time on other factors that made the Anabaptists so effective.

## The Great Commission for every believer

In addition to everything said in the previous article, it is clear the Anabaptists, unlike the Reformers, believed the Great Commission had not been intended for the apostles only. It was for their time and was binding on every Anabaptist congregation. They probably went further, being the first church group to believe the Great Commission was the responsibility of every believer.

Johann Kessler, an eyewitness, records the story of Anabaptism in St Gallen:

Thereafter our Anabaptists assumed the apostolic office as the first in the newly established church, believing that it was their obligation to follow Christ's command when he said, 'Go ye into all the world, etc' (Mark 16:15). They ran beyond the city gate into the outlying villages, regions, and market towns to preach there ... (Harder, 1985:423)

Historian Hans Kasdorf notes of the Anabaptists:

When asked what compelled them to go, they answered without hesitation: the Great Commission (Kasdorf, 1984:62).

So, who is responsible for the Great Commission today? If I am a true Anabaptist I have to take seriously that my little congregation in Gillingham is! I have to make it clear in my preaching and in my discipling of younger Christians that *they*, each one of them, has a clear Great Commission obligation. Do they realise it is not primarily the pastor's job, or to be left to mission agencies? And do I take seriously the fact that if they don't do it, I still must?

## The use of relational networks

To say that Anabaptists used relationships to spread the gospel seems a statement of the obvious. However, in our age of methods and cold-calls it is a point worth making. We may consider their use of relationships under three different headings.

First, they were quick to use their own personal *oikos* (family/kinship group). Such an approach provided a natural network of existing, strong relationships for the would-be

evangelist to build on. The fact that a friend or family member had converted to the notorious Anabaptists no doubt helped guarantee an inquisitive audience.

Then there were *neighbours and acquaintances*.

Bible study groups met in homes and invited unbelievers from the neighbourhood with the objective of winning them to the Lord. Social events such as weddings and similar community affairs ... provided excellent opportunities to make new acquaintances and to invite people to a Bible Reading (Kasdorf, 1984:60).

An advantage for Anabaptists was that, with their movement increasingly subject to arrest and persecution, and their preaching banned, working among those with whom they already had day-to-day contact provided cover for their activities.

The third network is worthy of special consideration – that created by their *trade or work*. Katherin Lorenzen (later the wife of Jacob Hutter) testified in court about her conversion, claiming that her employer, a Christian baker, and other employees had witnessed to her and persuaded her to join the Anabaptist sect. Indeed, the workplace often seems to have functioned for Anabaptists as an informal ‘Bible school’.

A fascinating court record exists of the trial of an Anabaptist called Hans Nadler, a needle seller to cobblers and tailors, and an active evangelist. In his trial he gave simple testimony of his methods (Snyder, 1995:107). These may be outlined as follows:

- *Introductory witness*. Nadler would begin witnessing in the course of normal conversation by mentioning the high cost of true religious commitment in the current moral and political climate.
- *Simple enquiry*. He would then enquire where his listener stood on such matters, and whether they were seeking after spiritual truth.
- *Explanation of faith*. If the other person seemed interested, Nadler would then explain his own faith in Christ, as clearly as he could.
- *Outline the cost*. Nadler would follow his explanation of the message with clear warnings of the great cost involved in truly following Christ. This cost was twofold: the inner cost of a life of selfless service and the outer one of persecution.
- *Basic nurture*. Although not in a position to baptise, if any conversation led to the person expressing a sincere desire to embrace the Anabaptist way, Nadler would conclude by giving basic instruction in the new faith, principally through two well-known ‘tools’: the Apostles Creed and the Lord’s Prayer.

Historian Arnold Snyder comments:

Nadler’s personal, direct and simple approach seems to have been the norm in Anabaptist evangelization of the people who were not part of one’s own circle of friends and family (Snyder 1995:107).

As I reflect on this, two things spring to mind. First, the Anabaptists put most of us to shame when it comes to personal witnessing. How often do we say to people that the most difficult place to witness is at home? How often do we tell people that ‘others’ who are more detached have a better chance of reaching our loved ones? Yet the Anabaptists seem to have made family and friends their first priority. Perhaps they were experiencing such a transformation of life, not just religion, that family witnessing was unavoidable!

The Anabaptists also show there is much benefit from deliberately and intentionally training every new believer in an appropriate ‘Nadler method’. Such training would cover how to: identify one’s relational network; introduce spiritual subjects into a conversation; tell one’s own conversion story; explain the Christian message (including culturally relevant illustrations); and offer basic encouragement to a new convert.

As a small start in this direction, our church plans to give every new member a shoebox containing: a jar of coffee (to encourage friendship evangelism); a number of tracts and booklets (for them to give away or use in conversation); a booklet and/or set of tapes outlining our church’s vision and values; and a short tape on a method of personal evangelism. It’s not earth-shattering, I know, but it is something.

### **Helpful tools**

Nadler’s use of the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed show that Anabaptists employed a range of devices to help them communicate their faith, especially among the illiterate and poorly educated. Two approaches in particular stand out:

**1. Songs** Anabaptists were great song writers. It was not uncommon for their hymns to have 20 or more verses. Such songs often told stories, usually those of Anabaptist martyrs, and in so doing reiterated core beliefs of the movement. Here is one example, translated by Hans Kasdorf (1984:63):

As God his Son was sending	And if thou, Lord, desire
Into this world of sin.	And should it be thy will
His Son is now commanding	That we taste sword and fire
That we this world should win	By those who thus would kill
He sends us and commissions	Then comfort, pray, our loved ones
To preach the gospel clear,	And tell them, we’ve endured
To call upon all nations	And we shall see them yonder –
To listen and to hear.	Eternally secured.

When one sees how the Anabaptists used hymns and Scripture, one is led to consider the whole area of worship/liturgy. In many churches this represents the backbone of church life. Indeed, in our predominately ‘Sunday event’ approach, the liturgy *is* church for many people. If we are to be missionary congregations we will need to develop new forms of liturgy that reflect God’s mission agenda. Indeed, is not mission an expression of the very being and character of God? In other words, *how about a missionary liturgy?* A mission-shaped liturgy, and hence a mission-shaped worship, could help form a

mission-shaped congregation. When I think of my own church's 'thirty minutes of singing' format I ask, what place does God's heart for the lost find in our worship? Does the shape of our service reflect the missionary agenda of God, or our own self-centred desire for a bless-up? (And I've got no one to blame but myself.)

**2. Topical concordances** Anabaptists gathered together their most important Scripture references and recorded them in concordances, usually under themed headings. Some seemed to have been intended for learning by rote, while others were hand-copied from person to person. The themes included baptism, the ban (church discipline), the Lord's Supper, discipleship, suffering and martyrdom, and apostasy. Such concordances were evidently very effective in helping the faithful to understand both their Anabaptist faith and their Bibles.

### **Biblical illiteracy**

Why is it – in an age where we have more versions, more freely available, than ever before – that so few Christians seem to know much about what the Bible says? It is sobering to think that in many cases an illiterate 16th-century Anabaptist would have known more Scripture than a degree-educated 21st-century evangelical! Again I must ask, Why? I offer three suggestions:

**1. A loss of faith in the Bible** Many believers have lost their nerve in grappling with scientific issues like evolution and cosmology, and moral issues like homosexuality and genetic engineering. As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin would have put it, we have become content to allow the Bible to be private devotional opinion, not public proclaimable truth. If Anabaptists had believed that, there would never have been a Radical Reformation. However, rhetoric will solve nothing. There is a responsibility on my part to educate believers on how to deal with these issues. Silence from the pulpit all too easily sounds like a confession of defeat.

**2. A loss of the lectionary** The tendency in most evangelical churches is to preach through a book or thematic series. However helpful this is, one must acknowledge a downside. The various lectionaries followed by many denominations not only require readings from the Old Testament, New Testament and the Gospels each Sunday, but also ensure that, over a period of time, the main themes, events, characters and truths of the faith are remembered. The comment of one house church leader – 'What's Lent? We have enough trouble remembering Christmas and Easter' – is hopefully not typical. There is also the tendency to focus on smaller and smaller parts of the Bible. To preach through Galatians one verse at a time, or to take six months to study Mark's Gospel may be commendable, but does the congregation end up learning more and more about less and less?

**3. We are making church membership too easy** If someone wishes to be baptised and (depending on our practice) join the church, should we not insist on proper preparation? Attending a course is not enough. A good baptismal/membership class should teach the

broad story of the Bible (salvation-history) and how to read it. After all, if baptism means anything, it surely means baptism into Christ and the story he has written and is writing.

### **Apostolic teams**

Initially Anabaptist preachers were often driven from town to town by persecution. However, the movement quickly began to bring more organisation to the missionary task. The Augsburg Synod divided up Europe for missionary activity and led to the formation of several 'teams' for church planting. Within two weeks of that meeting the Augsburg church alone had sent more than 24 missionaries to appointed places in Germany and Austria.

Typically Anabaptist teams consisted of three people – the preacher, a deacon (with special responsibility for practical ministry), and a 'common lay brother' (who acted as the messenger between church and team).

In the event that one of the team members was apprehended, the church was immediately notified so that reinforcement could be sent and those in prison visited and their needs supplied. (Kasdorf, 1984:65)

It was probably under the Hutterites that Anabaptist missionary endeavour was most organised. They sent mission teams each spring and autumn, and covered most of Germany and Austria, as well as making visits to Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Bohemia, Denmark and Slovakia. They developed a formal missionary training program, which may have been compulsory for every believer.

The Anabaptist practice of sending out small mission teams is one that we might fruitfully reproduce. Teams can be sent to other churches for evangelistic purposes, such as 'faith sharing', or for various social action projects. Such mission trips, especially if conducted in an ongoing partnership with the other church, can be a transformational experience for those who participate, as well as being helpful to the receiving church.

Is there any reason why small teams should not be sent out to plant churches? As many move away from Christendom and 'Sunday event' models, the need to send a big team armed with Sunday-school teachers and musicians is decreasing. How many people do you need to plant a cell church?

### **An end-time perspective**

The Anabaptists believed that 'time was short'. There was widespread apocalyptic fervour at the time, with the Reformers too believing that the last day was at hand. This undoubtedly helped the spread of Anabaptism:

The Anabaptists were in full harmony with large sectors of society in expecting an imminent end to the world ... Millennial expectations predispose those who

hold them to make dramatic choices about priorities and behaviour. (Kraybill, 1995:6).

This factor should not be overlooked. The doctrine of the second coming is all too easy to ignore in our context, where humanity's destiny seems in our own hands and fear of the sudden destruction of the world has receded. Yet the New Testament has ten references to Christ's return for every one to his birth. A focus on Christ's return in preaching and teaching would help, but it also needs to be reflected in our liturgy, hymnody and discipleship programmes. This is not a call to return to a simple-minded revivalism. Rather, it reflects the conviction that for Christians of the New Testament era, and for 16th-century Anabaptists, Christianity was lived in the knowledge that history would not go on for ever, and that its ending was closer now than at any time before. Such a conviction might bring an earnestness and urgency to the task of evangelism that the church desperately needs to reclaim. It might also act as a counterbalance to the increasing consumerism seeping into the church.

All of which has to be applied to *me* before it is applied to anyone else. How would I be living if I were *really* conscious of the immanent return of Jesus? I probably would not spend half the time worrying about the things I do at the moment. Would I allocate my time differently? Would I have greatly different priorities? Would I evaluate myself and my 'success' differently? I don't know. But I must acknowledge that life is often lived without any genuine expectation that Christ could return soon. I wish it were otherwise.

## **Conclusion**

The secret of the Anabaptists cannot be distilled into a formula or method. They had done nothing less than discovered a new form of Christianity, and it changed their lives. For them it was true, and it worked. No new idea, model or scheme holds the answers for us either. However, like them, we must dare to read the New Testament again with open eyes and open minds, seeking not to confirm our existing beliefs, but rather with a heart that says, 'Lord, show me a better way.' For them what emerged was a Christianity where community was to the fore, where faith led to a changed life, where discipleship really meant something, and where all of life was lived under the shadow of the return of Christ. I long for something similar for myself.

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# **Evangelism Among Asians – An Anabaptist Perspective**

By Bill Miller

What should British churches be doing to share the good news of Jesus with the Asian population of the country? Over recent years, I have been reflecting on the task of evangelism among British Asian communities. I have also been exploring the heritage of the Anabaptists. In doing so, I have gained insights, which may be of benefit to others.

There are about two million people in the United Kingdom whose ethnic origins are in the Indian sub-continent. Of these, about forty thousand would profess to be Christians. The rest would, at least nominally, be adherents of other world faiths, such as Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. If we are to fulfil the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), we need to face up to important questions about the nature of evangelism among them.

## **Christendom or a Multi-Faith Society?**

In a recent interview, the Archbishop of Canterbury said, “we mustn’t concede the game to being a multi-faith society...90 per cent are still rooted in a Christian position”. Such statements sound like echoes of Christendom - and it is not only in the established churches that they can be heard. There seems to be a widespread view in British churches that we should shore up the Christian heritage of the nation, which is under threat because of the diversity of its multi-racial population. A perspective is required which emphasises the call to Christian discipleship being made within the context of religious liberty, and the Anabaptists provide this. The sixteenth century Anabaptists were early pioneers of religious liberty. Hans Denck wrote, “no one shall deprive another - whether heathen or Jew or Christian - but rather allow everyone to move in all territories in the name of his God”. They recognised that, in order to be free to choose to follow Christ, people also needed to be free *not* to follow him. Another sixteenth century Anabaptist wrote: “Christ’s people are a free, unforced and uncompelled people, who receive Christ with desire and a willing heart”. The State should be impartial in matters of religious faith. Accepting a pluralist, multi-faith society is not the same as accepting syncretism or compromising on the unique claims of Jesus Christ.

The Anabaptists challenged the very notion of a Christian nation. The only society that could call itself Christian was the church, which was understood as a community of people freely choosing to follow Jesus Christ. This emphasis on Christianity being a voluntary way is an important one. When we muddle our language on the issue, we send wrong messages to our neighbours of other faiths. It is not that we should want Asian minorities to join the cultural mainstream. On the contrary, when the values and lifestyles of mainstream society are perceived as being Christian, it is a barrier to communicating the good news of Jesus.

In every generation, the gospel needs to be proclaimed afresh in word and action to people of all races, tribes, peoples and languages. This includes the majority white population, the Asian communities and others, so that all who respond can be grafted into

the new nation of God and receive the privileges of being the people of God. There is no church other than God's gathering together in community of those who have responded to the call to follow Christ. The words of the Anabaptist evangelist Hans Umlauf, written in 1539, have a radical ring to them even in the twentieth century: "We must listen to Christ when he says that many, who are today called Turks and heathen, will come from east and west and eat with Abraham in the kingdom of God. By contrast, the children of the kingdom, the so-called Christians and the Jews who presume to sit in the front and who believe that God belongs to them, will be thrust out. We heathen should be careful about such presumption since we are bastards and aliens in this Testament and covenant of grace".

A modern Mennonite statement describes the church as "a believers' church, a body of believers who enter the Church by baptism upon their voluntary confession of faith". The practice of believers' baptism reflects the understanding that entry into the Christian community is based on a free response to God. Jesus calls us to follow him and indeed a number of Asians choose to describe themselves as "followers of Jesus" in preference to calling themselves Christians. Christendom has eroded the term "Christian" over the centuries such that it is sometimes perceived as being a matter of birth or of Western culture rather than of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Those of other faiths who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ have not just traded one religion for another. They have entered into a new relationship of discipleship and this is expressed in community with others. However, this should not involve having to accept an alien Western culture. Kingdom living can be expressed in a variety of different cultural forms, and local churches need to find ways of doing this.

### **The Importance of Community**

Baptism is the crisis point of leaving one community and entering into another. It is a radical proclamation of allegiance. Those of other faiths tend to recognise better than most Christians that baptism is the point of no return. Some Asian families will tolerate their children attending church activities, but baptism is usually a step too far. Until a person is baptised, their curiosity about the Christian church can be interpreted as mere intellectual interest or a passing phase. Sometimes a privatised belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour is considered acceptable by other members of the family as a choice of personal spirituality. But baptism speaks more loudly than words of a commitment to a new family, a new loyalty and a new way of life.

Those of other faith backgrounds who have chosen to follow Christ are often ostracised from their own families and communities. There is a great need for local churches to act as new families for Asian disciples. The Anabaptists emphasised that members of the church were to express Christian community in practical and costly ways. The biblical image of the church as the family of God must not be allowed to remain just a theological concept. It needs to be lived out as a practical reality, which can sustain new Asian Christians. There are some Asians who mourn the fact that they left families for the sake of Christ but that all they got in return from the church was meetings. There is a grave danger that British churches are calling Asian people out of community into

individualism, rather than into new communities of the kingdom, and it is a danger against which we need to guard. Churches need to practise hospitality, share financially and, where appropriate, help young Asian people to find suitable marriage partners. These are expressions of family life. Many Asians who have made a decision to follow Christ end up turning back, often because it is too painful to break the ties of community. The Anabaptist vision is one that places great emphasis on the church as a community that sustains discipleship.

### **Suffering and Non-violence**

Because of the frequent experience of rejection and hostility for Asians who choose to follow Christ, one aspect of Anabaptist theology and spirituality which resonates across the centuries is the emphasis on being a suffering church. The experiences of persecution recorded in *The Martyrs' Mirror* and elsewhere have moulded Anabaptist identity and have provided a treasury of Christian testimony and reflection for the benefit of the wider Christian church. The witness borne by faithful Christians in the midst of persecution transcends the particularities of any one culture.

Another Anabaptist distinctive that has proved fruitful is the emphasis on non-violence, especially as this involves the church distancing itself from the violent actions of the State. Christianity and British Imperialism in India have at times had a murky mixed history. It is far from being the entire story of Christian mission in the Indian sub-continent, but as a Sikh friend has said to me, the British found it easier to subjugate and kill the Indian people when they regarded them as heathens. Pointing to a history of Christian non-violence, which pre-dates British Imperialism, has gained me more of a hearing than otherwise might have been the case.

The crusades of the Middle Ages provide an even clearer example of violence being committed in the name of Christ. They are a much more vivid part of the communal memory for most Muslims than for most Christians. The failure of a number of Christian groups to face up to that sinful history has allowed them to use the term "crusade" for evangelistic campaigns. This is as offensive as proclaiming the good news of Jesus to the Jews in terms of him being "the final solution". The rejection of coercive power is the way of Jesus and should be the way of his disciples. We need to give expression to that in our churches, which will involve a repentant awareness of our past.

When the way of coercive power is laid aside, there comes a greater freedom to share the good news of Jesus in word and action. When any religious group proselytises from a position of political power, others can experience it as an act of aggression. If we are to follow the way of the cross, the love of Christ should be shared from a position of vulnerability. We should open ourselves up to being hurt whilst making every effort not to harm others. We should offer life to those around us whilst seeking to safeguard their right to reject it. We need to develop communities of faith that incarnate these realities. The Anabaptists can in this way provide much nourishing food for thought and action for the churches as we seek to reach out to our Asian neighbours with truly wholesome and radical good news.

## **Signs of Hope?**

Extract from Stuart Murray & Anne Wilkinson-Hayes: *Hope from the Margins* (Grove, 2000)

### **What is church?**

How we define church obviously affects the examples we select as hopeful. Different individuals and groups will have their own definitions and criteria for hopefulness. As we introduce the following examples and reflect on why they seem hopeful to us, we should identify our own perspectives. Our definition of 'what is church?' and our framework for reflection are undoubtedly shaped by our Baptist and Anabaptist backgrounds and convictions.

However we would claim also that our determining factors arise from some key characteristics of the early churches, the communities closest to the teaching and life of Jesus. The church grew in the first four centuries at a far more rapid rate than in subsequent generations, and research has highlighted several significant elements to this growth. These include a real sense of Christian community, a willingness to serve the society around, and a distinctive lifestyle, which intrigued and fascinated people. It is these three factors which we look for in our 'signs of hope'.

The following examples include unintentional churches, church plants, resurrected churches, groups that would class themselves as Christian communities rather than churches, and groups that would not call themselves church at all!

### **The Hope Community**

Three Roman Catholic religious sisters were asked by their Parish church to conduct a community survey in Heath Town, Wolverhampton – a nine tower-block estate with much social need. The sisters went into the estate every day and simply listened to people's pain and despair. As time went by, they felt increasingly ill at ease returning to their own house in a comfortable suburb and eventually rented a maisonette on the third floor of one of the tower blocks. They continued their life of community and prayer from this flat, and were available to local people. Their presence catalysed many social changes, although they did not set out to initiate anything. Estate services have begun – planned and led by local people. Computer courses have started, holidays, celebrations, literacy training have all improved the quality of life. Their strength of community has been central to this way of being church. Their small community has helped create greater community in the wider and otherwise dysfunctional setting.

The sisters would not publicly call what happens 'church', but members of the local community perceive the third floor maisonette as the chapel for the estate. Sister Margaret Walsh tells the lovely story of a local man in prison, asking to phone his Mother Superior! A key theological reflection on this way of doing church is that the

sisters resisted any notion of imposing anything. Their aim throughout has been to discover what God was already doing in people. There is no idea of taking God to people – they see that as part of the power relationship that many people at the bottom of the heap resent. Rather, their focus is to enable people to see God in the everyday.

### **Living Proof**

This emerged on the outskirts of Cardiff out of a house group, who were a little disillusioned with church life and wanted to be more relevant in how they lived out the gospel. ‘There must be something more!’ was their cry. They spent time praying and came to the unlikely conclusion, given they had no children of their own, that it was to be work with local children.

They started a small Bible club in 1984. This was initially very traditional church-based Christian youth work, but it grew over the years until they were running clubs six days a week, for all age groups. Following a visit to New Jersey in 1993, Living Proof was born – an approach to youth work which involves teaching life skills to young people through teaching them to care for younger young people. In several local schools the courses are now a fully accredited part of the curriculum. Their summer play schemes are very popular – involving 1500 children over the five weeks and drawing on the skills of dozens of volunteers. The Living Proof catch-phrase is that ‘everybody is special’; all their courses are imbued with this ethos. It appears to be making a huge difference to many very disenfranchised kids, and is valued by authorities and parents.

So far, Living Proof was just a good example of Christian community work, but the children began to see staff meeting for prayer and asked to join them. Young people became Christians on Living Proof weeks, but where could they go for discipleship? They did not fit into local churches. Soon there were too many to fit in a house and they started meeting in a community centre. It was never their intention, but they discovered they had a church. The young people themselves have developed a different approach. They have discussion, prayer and worship on Sunday evenings, but on Sunday morning they have ‘Sunday service’ – activities like singing in Old People’s homes, cleaning graffiti, helping in Sunday Schools of smaller churches.

Now the leaders are ordained and Living Proof is recognised as an Anglican Church plant, with an inter-denominational congregation. It will be interesting to see if the label changes the fresh and imaginative approach they have developed. This story suggests that, when Kingdom work happens in a way that truly engages the whole person, church in an authentic form emerges.

### **The Furnival**

George MacCleod speaks of Iona as a thin place where heaven and earth come very close. Our brief encounters with The Furnival in Sheffield have been similar, but any visit is merely a snapshot in time, and one of the worries about telling these stories is that exposure can sometimes damage fragile experiments.

The Furnival, which has been recently publicised through a Baptist Union Home Mission video, is an example of resurrected church. The last formal Christian witness on the notorious Burngreave Estate ended when the Methodist Church closed, but four elderly members refused to believe God had given up on the estate and continued to meet and pray in each other's homes. They were right. Jane Grinnoneau experienced an extraordinary call to minister in the derelict pub on the estate when she was lost on her way to the Urban Theology Unit. Her story of the miracles of acquiring the building and fitting it out to meet local needs is very special. From vandalised, stripped pub it has become a skills centre for young people, a training kitchen and café, and surrounding buildings have been earmarked for a launderette and multi-agency health and advice centre. As Josie's story on the video illustrates, local people are being touched by the love and grace of Christ.

The Furnival would resist being labelled a church plant, as this puts the focus on the wrong area. They say church, as we currently use the term, is too closely identified with congregational meetings for worship. Worship and prayer are the fuel and lifeblood of their activity, but the work is discovering the Kingdom of God among local people. Church at The Furnival is about being the yeast that ferments change in the dough. They do not invite people to 'come to church' but to find God's love and acceptance as they work for wholeness in the community through participating in various projects and initiatives. Everything done in Christ's name, or wherever love is revealed, is church in the true sense. The word church is used less and less as it creates more barriers than it overcomes.

### **The Crowded House**

A different Sheffield-based group meets in a substantial Victorian house. Emerging as an offshoot of a large Anglican church, the group have developed a pattern of life, service and worship unencumbered by any building. When challenged about how people find out about them, they explain that they serve their 'virtual community' – that is, their own networks of friends, relatives and work contacts that are drawn from all over the city. People in most middle-class areas are no longer constrained by geography, and are used to travelling to work or to see friends. The evidence at the Crowded House is that people are comfortable coming to explore Christianity in a home – the group is growing. The concepts of the parish and the 'local' church are no longer relevant in many communities. Indeed, it could be argued that many traditional churches engage in doublethink – placing the focus on local mission when in fact the majority of members live away from the immediate locality.

### **The Children's Church**

Based in Deptford, South-east London, this has grown out of a congregation once linked with the Ichthus Christian Fellowship. Until recently it met every Saturday morning with up to 80 children. They have songs, games and Bible stories often led by the children themselves. This is more than just an extended children's programme or an adjunct to adult church: the adults have consciously shaped their understanding of church around

Jesus' teaching about learning from children. Their Sunday and mid-week meetings also allow significant space for the full participation of children – encouraging genuine friendships to be formed between children and adults. The priority is about doing church through a child's eyes, rather than asking children to fit in around what are usually predominantly adult structures. This approach is not without its difficulties, including the demands of time and energy on a relatively small group of adults, which have led to the children's church now meeting less often. But it provides an interesting example of a differently focused way of being church.

### **Pen Rhys**

At the head of the Rhondda Valley, a church planted as an ecumenical initiative in a new housing development in the 1970s has a similar focus on children. It represents a very different tradition to the church in Deptford, having a formal liturgical pattern and strong institutional linkages. For many years this church struggled to make any significant headway in the isolated and dislocated community that had been forced together from all over the country to fill the new housing. When they identified education as a primary long-term need of the area and focused on supporting and complementing the work in local schools, the place of the church became more secure. Through obtaining funding for educational workers, running music lessons and choirs, developing a strong social and discipleship programme for school age children and having school assemblies in the church on a regular basis, church has become relevant, without any attempt to entertain or dumb-down the content. For example, as many as twenty children, some as young as five and many illiterate, gather to sing antiphonal Compline every Wednesday night. The current minister describes the active leadership of the church as being seventeen year olds.

### **Oné Respé** (*Creole for 'Honour and Respect'*)

It is important that we learn from situations beyond the U.K. The church is being shaped in radical and exciting ways in many poorer communities around the globe. In the Dominican Republic there is considerable institutionalised racism between the Spanish-speaking, lighter skinned Dominican population and the darker skinned Creole-speaking population of Haitian origin. Haitians are consistently excluded from healthcare, education and economic security. In general the churches reflect the divided nature of the society. One exception to this is the community of Oné Respé in Santiago, who work with both sectors and bring them together to participate in shared projects of social improvement. Their approach has been to use the local radio station, which is universally listened to in the poorest areas.

One of the community leaders, an extraordinarily gifted woman from a Haitian background, broadcasts a regular programme based on Ignatian spirituality exercises. Each week she raises a different subject for meditation and reflection, such as 'How do we know God loves us?', or 'If God loves us, what is our response?' Groups then gather in the various favellas and talk about their individual responses to the subjects, and then consider the corporate community responses. 'How can we show love in this

community?', 'What would Jesus want to change here?'. These small discussion groups are regularly visited by the Oné Respé staff and volunteers, and they come together for larger celebrations and teaching sessions. Given the Catholic or Voodoo backgrounds of the local people, they would not see these gatherings as church, and yet many testify to finding life and reality in their faith for the first time. Real social transformation is taking place; people are being empowered to challenge the gross injustices of their society; and the gospel is being good news for people.

### **The Church of the Saviour**

A much more structured approach is the Church of the Saviour in Washington DC. This is included, not because it is new, having been active for over thirty years, but because it offers a quite different model for being church, a model which has been influential and provocative among urban church leaders in Britain. Here nine separate congregations have developed, each with its own ethos. They ask three questions. What is the mission in this downtown area of the city? What kind of community is needed to sustain the mission? And what set of spiritual disciplines is required to sustain that community in that mission?

They have developed congregations around a hospital for street people, a job centre, a housing association, a coffee shop and book centre, an inter-generational home caring for the elderly, to name but a few. It is possible for someone to come off the street, and to move through the ministries of the various communities: to go through detox, to find accommodation and a job and a whole new beginning in life and faith. What unites the congregations as one church is the teaching and discipleship programme that they all share in, run by the Servant Leadership School – another mission congregation. This again has a unique flavour, for they have devised a highly contextualised approach to reading scripture and allowing the context to shape the theology. The strength of this model is the priority on mission. The mission shapes the form of the church, which seems to have a ring of gospel authenticity. This might be a good model for city-centre churches to explore.

### **But is it Church?**

#### **a) A Work-based group**

Christians, including senior directors, scientists and cleaners, meet at their place of work – a Science Laboratory. They pray for each other and for colleagues at work. They discuss issues of relevance to their faith and work. They occasionally share in mission activities in the work place. A participant says 'It's far more relevant and fulfilling than anything in my local church.' But it's not church, or is it?

#### **b) The Neighbours**

This is a residential community in a suburban area of Northampton. Members have neighbouring houses with their own front doors but share a huge back garden which is

cultivated communally. They eat together two or three times a week and pray together every morning. Together they initiated the Daily Bread Wholefood Co-operative, which provides employment for people with mental health problems. The community was able to offer additional residential support for some of these staff members. The houses have internal connections, which make it possible for care to be shared between two households. Their priority is to live and work in ways which contribute to a fairer world. They do not call themselves church, but what are they?

### **c) Group**

'Group' has met in Oxford on Thursday nights for over five years. Drawn from over four other churches, they meet around a table in different homes, and punctuate the meal with a liturgy, songs, prayers and lots of laughter. The age span is from eight to over sixty. During the meal current affairs are often discussed, and the relevance or otherwise of faith. Sometimes the group does Bible study together. Sometimes guests are invited; Group listens to their stories and prays for them. Members often have other contact with each other during the week and seek to care for and strengthen each others' ministries. The simple format has had a profound and sustaining impact on the lives of both regular and occasional visitors, but is it church?

### **d) Mill Grove**

A residential home for children in East London, this has been run on a faith basis for over 100 years. It is currently home to 15 children, several single parents, two families in need and the staff and their families. They have open days and every Thursday provide lunch for local residents, who share needs and voice prayer requests. Over time they have developed, quite unconsciously, almost Benedictine patterns of life. Their director sees this as unremarkable as the Orders have developed the ideal basis for human community in terms of private and public space and patterns of work and prayer. They are so well-known and respected locally that people turn up at the door and ask how to become Christians. They talk about effortless evangelism. The director also says they are not a church. All members are encouraged to attend other local churches. But why are they not a church?

### **e) Urban Expression**

A mission initiative of Spurgeon's College and Oasis Trust, this places teams of mainly young people in under-churched areas of East London, who are working towards sharing the good news of Jesus with people around them. They do not want to use the term church until it is given to them and owned by local people. They live and work in the area, getting involved in youth clubs, football clubs and community activities. They worship in homes, and the team in Shadwell sees the most authentic form of church for that area being household-sized. They are seeking at some stage to be recognised as a Baptist Church, but is this church?

Analysing these examples shows they all reflect the key elements we identified earlier which characterised the New Testament church. They are worshipping groups who have a strong sense of community and shared life at their core. They are primarily geared around mission and service and they have, to greater and lesser extents, a fairly distinctive lifestyle. These stories provide inspiration. They offer hope. It is possible to do church differently, and in ways that appear to have a gospel impact on local communities.

# Modernity and Postmodernity

## A. Modernity

Modernity is the worldview that developed from the cultural and philosophical shift known as the Enlightenment, which took place during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is associated with such ideas as secularism, rationalism and scientific materialism. Central aspects of *modernity* are:

- Reason is the basis for knowledge and decision-making.
- Objectivity is possible because subject and object are separate.
- The world operates through the interplay of cause and effect.
- Progress, development and modernisation are achievable goals: all problems are solvable.
- Only scientifically established facts can be trusted; values are matters of personal opinion only.
- People are regarded as free and autonomous individuals.

## B. Postmodernity

*Postmodernity* represents a challenge to these beliefs:

- The reliance on reason alone is inadequate. Science does not have all the answers, nor is it equipped to deal with certain questions. The exclusion of other areas of human experience in making discoveries and decisions is unhelpful.
- Keeping subject and object apart is impossible – there is interaction between them. Pure objectivity is a myth; presuppositions are involved. The result is a mechanistic approach to the world and exploitation of the environment.
- Explaining everything as cause and effect is reductionist, excluding questions of meaning and purpose that are important. We cannot live in a world that has no meaning.
- The optimism that all problems are solvable has been destroyed; the evolution of the human race towards maturity received a major setback in two world wars; development for part of the world has been attained through exploiting the rest of it; advances in technology have solved some problems but created others, and the destruction of the world through nuclear weapons or ecological disaster is a possible fruit of “progress”.
- The division between facts and values is untenable. All facts are interpreted facts: there are no “value-free” facts. Belief systems give a framework within which facts make sense.
- The emphasis on freedom and individualism has worked against community and social justice. Persons know themselves not as isolated individuals but as persons in relationship.

The main features of *postmodernity* (apart from above critique of modernism) include:

- A commitment to relativism in relation to questions of truth. There are no absolutes. Truth is in the mind of the believer as much as beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- There is no “big story” or metanarrative. Any attempt to claim that there is becomes oppressive and excludes other stories and the people who tell them.
- There is no such thing as history. There is no discernible pattern in past events or any way to interpret their meaning. Only the present moment matters.
- Meaning is subjective rather than objective. When looking at a text, the original intention of the author is irrelevant: a text means whatever the reader understands by it.
- Spiritual values are significant and belief systems must be taken seriously, though without allowing claims to exclusivity. Imagination is necessary as well as rationality. Society is secular only in the sense that no one value system is officially allowed to dominate.
- The world is seen through a biological rather than mechanistic model: concern for the environment and understanding of humanity as part of the environment.
- Institutions and hierarchies are distrusted in favour of networks and grass-roots groups. Styles of organisation and leadership are changing. Male dominance is challenged.
- Iconoclasm – a refusal to give respect to established traditions or to take anything, including itself, too seriously. An emphasis on the chaotic and fragmentary rather than order and harmony. Readiness to hold together contradictory beliefs. Deep scepticism.
- Pluralism – a commitment to choice at every level; a recognition that modern culture is diverse, global and a constantly shifting set of sub-cultures.
- Diversity – “pick-and-mix” society, collage, pastiche, rough edges, discord, merging the cultural and the commercial, the medium as the message, style rather than content, throw-away culture.

Another attempt to summarise postmodernity suggest the following categories:

- Spirituality without Christianity
- Environment without a Creator
- Words without meaning
- Individuality without belonging
- The present without a future
- Behaviour without consequences
- Image without reality
- Single issues without the big picture