

Church after Christendom: Belonging/Believing/Behaving

This is the first chapter of Stuart Murray's book, Church after Christendom.

Belonging, believing and behaving after Christendom

His wife was a Christian and belonged to a church, but Ben was not a believer. He was a Jew and an agnostic. But over the years he watched and listened, developed friendships in the church, took part in various church activities and attended more regularly than many members. The church welcomed him and waited patiently. He imbibed their values and shared his own concerns, prayer requests and, finally, prayers. One day he called God 'Father'. Shortly before he died, eighteen years after first attending the church, he was baptised as a believer.

Mary was in her late fifties. She had never been to church before and she knew nothing about what Christians believed. She sat quietly at the back. On her way home she found herself 'speaking in this odd language'. The next day she returned various small items she had stolen from the office she cleaned and in the evening went to make peace with a neighbour to whom she had not spoken for twenty years. The following Sunday she returned to church, asking 'why am I doing these things?' She too was soon baptised as a believer.

Paul was in his twenties. He had left church because it did not connect with him spiritually or culturally and he was outraged by unacknowledged power politics in the congregation. He had always resisted the church's insistence that he should be evangelising friends and inviting them to church. He knew that they would find the services weird, trite and unappealing. But now he no longer had to worry about friends asking if they could attend church with him, the embarrassment had gone and all kinds of conversations were opening up. But he was unsure what he would do if any of them became Christians...

Belonging and believing

The language of 'belonging' and 'believing' (and less often 'behaving') has become familiar in discussions about faith, church and mission. It offers helpful perspectives on issues facing churches after Christendom.

Researchers and sociologists, examining the relationship between what people believe and their participation in religious institutions, have identified two common positions – 'believing without belonging' and 'belonging before believing'. Some people do not belong to a church but identify themselves as Christians and hold beliefs that are more or less consistent with those who do belong. Others participate in church before they identify themselves as Christians or decide what they believe.

Many Christians seize on the first phrase to interpret their experience of friends and family members. They already know what researchers confirm and quantify. Many people believe in God, pray frequently, accept core Christian convictions and attempt to live by Christian values. Some previously belonged to a church; others have only ever believed without belonging.

Mission strategists and church leaders are especially interested in the second phrase. Many parish churches have always functioned on the basis that parishioners 'belong' (and have certain legal rights) regardless of their beliefs. Elsewhere, however, those who wished to belong were expected

to subscribe to certain beliefs. But churches that have historically applied a 'believing before belonging' approach report increasing numbers wanting to 'belong' before believing.

Many strategists encourage us to embrace this new paradigm. A key discovery of the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990s was that many people journey to faith gradually rather than suddenly. Churches that had previously expected 'crisis conversions' now recognised 'process conversions' as equally valid. This came as a relief to many Christians, especially in evangelical churches, where pressure to identify a definite conversion date prompted some to invent one to ward off suspicions they were not properly converted! The new paradigm has spawned 'process evangelism' courses and has encouraged churches to become more welcoming, hospitable, inclusive and patient.

What factors have prompted 'belonging before believing' even in churches that previously required that belief preceded participation? Theological reflection on the relationship between belonging and believing appears to have followed rather than precipitated this change, so we must look to factors beyond the churches themselves. The most obvious are the cultural shifts signalled by the terms 'postmodernity' and 'post-Christendom':

- In postmodernity, people are suspicious of institutions and more interested in whether beliefs work in practice than whether they are theoretically true. So belonging before believing is necessary to test whether Christians live out in their communities what they claim to be true.
- In post-Christendom, knowledge of Christianity is limited; people need longer to understand and respond to the gospel. Furthermore, church culture is alien, so exploratory participation is safer than making a definite commitment.

Many emerging churches practise 'belonging before believing', considering this vital for engaging with a postmodern constituency. This approach attracts refugees from churches with firm boundaries that have resisted this paradigm shift. A 'centred-set' model of community is also popular, in contradistinction to the 'bounded-set' model operating in many inherited churches. Centred-set communities represent a dynamic and flexible approach, allowing people to journey towards or away from a church without encountering fixed entry or exit points.

Discussions about the relationship between belonging and believing have highlighted significant missional and pastoral issues:

- The inadequacy of equating Christians exclusively with those who belong to churches.
- The importance of affirming the faith journeys of those whose conversion is gradual.
- The limitations of institutional membership models in contemporary culture.
- The challenge of building churches that faithfully and attractively incarnate the gospel they proclaim.
- The implications of prioritising core values over boundary maintenance.

These are issues to which post-Christendom churches must give careful attention.

Belonging and believing revisited

But interaction between belonging and believing is not restricted to these two familiar scenarios. Viewed through the post-Christendom lens, many variations are visible. To appreciate the complexity of post-Christendom we must examine further permutations of believing and belonging.

Believing and belonging

In pre-Christendom (roughly the first three centuries before the Christendom shift), believing and belonging were well-integrated. Belonging was vital for believers as a deviant minority in an alien environment; and only believers would dare belong to an illegal organisation subject to persecution.

Although Christians shared their faith freely with friends and neighbours, church meetings were not open to outsiders: the danger of spies infiltrating the community precluded this. Those who expressed interest in Christianity explored this through a lengthy and demanding process known as *catechesis*. This explained what Christians believed and how they behaved. It also assessed whether enquirers were ready to take further steps towards belonging. Catechists assumed no familiarity with the Christian story or its values; and, since belonging meant participating in a counter-cultural community, learning what to believe and how to behave were both necessary. Neither belonging before believing nor believing without belonging was feasible. Growth in believing and belonging (and behaving) went hand in hand.

Required to believe and belong

In Christendom, everyone was required to belong to the church and believe what it taught. Dissent and non-attendance persisted for various reasons, but both attracted penalties. Belonging preceded believing, for infants were baptised into the church before they could even understand what to believe; but it was assumed they would grow up to believe what everyone believed.

However, as Christian beliefs were familiar, and mediated through multiple cultural symbols and an institution to which everyone belonged, churches gave less attention to catechesis. Rudimentary instruction, primarily dealing with liturgical and doctrinal issues, replaced the biblical and ethical teaching of pre-Christendom. Christendom's version of Christianity was culturally conventional and imparted by osmosis rather than catechesis.

Christendom could be an oppressive culture, riddled with nominality and often with immorality, and the gulf between what church members were meant to believe and actually believed was often substantial (the same was true with regard to behaviour). But in an officially Christian society believing and belonging were mandatory.

Daring to believe and belong

Those who dissented, espoused different beliefs and chose not to belong to the official church found themselves, like the early churches, on the margins – and in even greater peril (since the Christendom authorities were more efficient and persistent persecutors than their pagan predecessors). Consequently, the serious but voluntary belonging and believing that characterised the early churches reappeared in the medieval dissenting movements.

Belonging but no longer believing

As Christendom unravelled between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, many still belonged out of loyalty, social convention, family connections or inertia; but some no longer believed. They continued to attend for aesthetic or cultural reasons but resisted theological or spiritual development. Some became biblically illiterate or stymied in an adolescent belief system to which they could not seriously subscribe; others could not connect Christianity and the claims of modernity and retreated into dualism. Many ensured their church attendance had no practical influence on the rest of their lives.

Such attitudes may have been more or less prevalent throughout the Christendom era, but they became more visible as the social control exercised by the church weakened. This social

churchgoing still persists but will surely disappear during the twenty-first century. Those for whom social factors remain influential are ageing and there is little evidence younger generations will continue to shore up declining congregations.

Believing but not belonging

But Christendom has unravelled in various ways. Another indication of its lingering influence is the proportion of the population who have never belonged to the church (except through church schools and christening or wedding ceremonies) but identify themselves as Christians and subscribe to Christian beliefs. Surveys over many years confirm this, although the content of what is believed varies considerably, with beliefs becoming more selective and syncretistic. Callum Brown notes: 'Though 74 per cent of people express a belief in the existence of some kind of God or "higher power", 50 per cent or fewer subscribe to the existence of sin, the soul, heaven, hell or life after death – while the numbers having specific faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord are so statistically insignificant that opinion pollsters do not even ask the question.' Steve Bruce also insists that, though the proportion claiming Christian beliefs is higher than the proportion who belong to the churches, 'there is also considerable and consistent evidence that conventional religious beliefs are also declining in popularity...there has been a steady decline in the popularity of Christian beliefs, which shadows the decline in church attendance.'

Nevertheless, Christians have hailed each survey with enthusiasm as evidence that Christianity is alive and well in western culture. Some suggest the churches should accept the validity of believing without belonging. Richard Thomas writes: 'Finding ways of speaking to the spirituality of a generation who do not come to church is not a matter of bringing them in, but of changing our understanding of the nature of Church itself.' He even proposes a further category: believing is belonging – 'possibly the strongest form of belonging'. Others, unconvinced by this interpretation, regard the surveys as stimuli to redouble efforts to persuade believers also to belong. Many such believers, however, are resistant, some regarding 'not belonging' as a virtue. Aspects of Christianity may be worth identifying with when completing a survey form, but the churches are generally not associated with these.

Grace Davie, who coined the phrase 'believing without belonging', detects a 'latent sense of belonging' and denotes the preferred option 'vicarious religion'. Another suggestion is that many view the church like a fire station. They are glad it exists and are grateful for its expertise in the event of a fire. They may even be willing to pay for its services, but they will not convene on a weekly basis to celebrate its existence! Others distinguish 'nominal' and 'notional' Christians – the latter representing more tenuous believing and less likelihood of belonging. There are indications nominality is becoming notional Christianity, where ticking a survey form merely implies 'British' or non-member of another religion. As post-Christendom advances, both categories will shrink, so we would beware investing false hopes in survey results.

This does not mean dismissing the beliefs and spiritual experiences of those who do not belong, and may never have belonged – any more than we should equate church membership with Christian faith. Such neat but simplistic categories were typical of Christendom but need not characterise post-Christendom. But we should not imagine a ready supply of non-belonging believers waiting for refurbished post-Christendom churches. A more creative missional strategy will be required.

Belonging but only partly believing

Belonging without believing may be diminishing, but some now belong who believe only part of what their churches teach. In modernity, Christianity was regarded as an integrated and coherent

system inviting wholehearted belief or unbelief; but many in postmodernity affirm some beliefs but feel no obligation to accept everything.

Different churches cope with this pick-and-mix tendency in different ways. Some find it threatening and exhort those who belong to endorse their whole belief system; some are relaxed about many aspects of what people believe but emphasise core beliefs and values; some adopt an almost entirely open approach with neither firm boundaries nor a definite core. Some welcome the challenge of dissenters and doubters, embracing the opportunity to reassess long-held convictions against biblical teaching, traditional understandings and contemporary approaches. Others are concerned that postmodern partial believing becomes disconnected from the Christian story and detracts from the integrity of Christian faith.

Believing but no longer belonging

Some believe who have never belonged; many others once belonged and still believe though they no longer belong. This is another form of 'believing without belonging', but the faith dynamics and attitudes of people in this category are very different from those who have never belonged.

There has been over the past several years an exodus of many who have belonged for years and were deeply committed members, who feel they can no longer belong with integrity. Most 'church leavers' still believe but no longer find belonging conducive to Christian discipleship. Chapter 2 will explore the reasons why they left and the implications for both leavers and churches.

Believing but belonging less intensely

Recent research indicates belonging no longer implies the same level of participation as it once did. The term 'twicers' designated those who attended both morning and evening services each Sunday; it now describes those who attend services twice a month. Fortnightly and monthly participation is now common. Some are reluctant to take on responsibilities (especially regular responsibilities) in church life that previous generations would have welcomed. And many resist becoming church 'members' in a post-commitment culture or move easily and frequently between congregations and denominations.

Interpreting and addressing this widespread tendency is problematic. There are good reasons why many want to belong less intensely than their forebears: more complex family dynamics that place considerable pressure on Sundays; changing patterns of work that both require increased time commitment and offer vocational fulfilment many once found in churches; increased commuting times that preclude midweek participation; and involvement in community initiatives previously run by churches but now independent of them.

Some claim the Christendom model of belonging was rooted in a dualistic worldview and hindered Christians from incarnating the gospel beyond the congregation. Less intense belonging is not a problem, therefore, but welcome liberation. However, such dualism likely applies more to the post-Enlightenment era than the sacral society of Christendom. The question this begs in post-Christendom is what level of belonging is needed to sustain incarnational discipleship in an alien culture.

But many aspects of inherited church were designed for a different context in which churches were socially and culturally central. Marginal post-Christendom churches need not struggle to maintain programmes designed for a Christendom culture.

Believing and belonging intermittently

What happens to those who once belonged but leave even though they still believe? The next chapter will investigate this more fully, but we can note here (as a further expression of the believing/belonging nexus) that some leavers eventually return. This may be after many years and to a different kind of church from the one they left. But for many, though by no means all, leavers the desire to belong finally overcomes their reluctance.

Another pattern is the tendency of some Christians to belong intermittently to several expressions of church. This may involve fairly regular involvement in two or more congregations; primary commitment to one church but frequent sampling of others; belonging to a dispersed Christian community; or participation in various informal Christian gatherings. A term some apply to this phenomenon is 'portfolio church'; others call it 'liquid church'. Some interpret it as indicating the pernicious influence of consumerism; others regard it as inevitable and beneficial in a networking culture.

Belonging but not yet believing

How should we regard the acceptance by many churches, despite their theology and history, that many people want to belong before they believe? The creation of process evangelism courses and the more sensitive and hospitable attitude of these churches towards those some designate 'seekers' are welcome developments. If people want to explore Christianity by 'belonging' before deciding what they believe, churches can surely respond with integrity and patience.

But will 'belonging before believing' continue in an increasingly post-Christendom context? Perhaps it depends what we mean by 'belonging'. The process evangelism courses and revamped attractional strategies in which many are investing enormous hope may prove to be valuable but short-lived responses to this transitional period at the end of Christendom. The supply of 'seekers' may dry up.

We will still need hospitable post-Christendom churches in which those who do not yet believe can participate as they explore faith. But 'belonging before believing' is actually the classic Christendom model. If we work with it in post-Christendom, we must beware Christendom temptations – waiting for people to come to us rather than going to them, downplaying conversion (whether through crisis or process) and underestimating the necessary induction process.

Believing but not yet belonging

As post-Christendom develops, some who have no connection with any church will come to faith through relationships with individual Christians. Incarnational forms of mission are emerging that no longer rely on attractional methods or people eager to belong before they believe. In these creative and courageous initiatives *centrifugal* mission is replacing *centripetal* mission. If 'belonging before believing' is applicable to such initiatives, the key is Christians 'belonging' within many neighbourhoods and networks, and building relationships through which 'believing' can begin.

Those who become believers may not assume 'belonging' is an important expression of 'believing'. They may not be averse to belonging, but church participation will not be automatic for them. But those who believe before they belong – even more than those who belong before they believe – will need more thorough discipling than most churches thought necessary in the last decades of Christendom. Post-Christendom converts, like pre-Christendom converts, will be joining counter-cultural communities with deviant values and beliefs rooted in an unfamiliar story. 'Process discipleship' courses may be more useful than process evangelism courses in post-Christendom churches.

Neither belonging nor believing

One category remains. In post-Christendom the vast majority of people will probably neither belong nor believe. Projections based on a continuation of current patterns of church decline suggest the Christian community will be much smaller by 2030 than it is today. Projections based on measurements of what people believe indicate believing without belonging will also diminish. There is nothing deterministic about this, but honesty and realism are important if we are to respond faithfully and creatively to the challenges ahead.

What is less clear is the relationship between ceasing to believe and ceasing to belong. Stephen Green writes: 'Conventional wisdom and common sense suggest that people stopped going to church because they no longer believed what the churches taught them. Perhaps the causal mechanism was really closer to the opposite: they stopped believing because they stopped going.'

At the heart of our response must be recalibration of the church as a cross-cultural missionary movement. We will return to this in chapter 5. Here we simply note that believing and belonging may be more integrally connected in post-Christendom than they have been since pre-Christendom. Belonging before believing may persist, but belonging without believing will surely disappear; and believing without belonging will be unsustainable in post-Christendom, where both believing and belonging will be minority pursuits of 'resident aliens' in a strange new world.

Degrees of alienation

Alienation works in both directions. Christians in post-Christendom who accept their status as resident aliens will need to renegotiate how to be 'in the world' but 'not of the world'. This does not imply pietistic withdrawal from society but fresh thinking about how representatives of marginal churches with counter-cultural values engage in political and cultural debate and participate in local communities.

Churches – whether understood as institutions, buildings or congregations – will be culturally alien in post-Christendom. They will be familiar as architectural legacies and their influence on the development of western culture will be acknowledged (for post-Christendom implies a memory of Christendom). But the gap between churches as living faith communities and other people will be much wider than at present.

Considering even the current gap between church and culture, some suggest we are moving from a context where most people beyond the churches can be labelled 'de-churched' to one where more are actually 'non-churched'. Previously most people had at least limited knowledge of or connection with churches. But the 'non-churched' are rapidly overtaking the 'de-churched'. The Anglican report, *Mission-Shaped Church*, calculates they are currently neck and neck with 40% non-churched, 20% 'open de-churched', 20% 'closed de-churched' and 10% 'fringe attenders'. But 'if the groups are age-weighted, the de-churched are 25% and shrinking and the non-churched are 65% and growing.' The absence from church of 96% of British children suggests this proportional shift will accelerate.

The complex relationship between believing and belonging indicates we may need several categories to map the degrees of alienation from church experienced in late Christendom and post-Christendom:

- The *semi-churched* are those who have some connection with a church and occasionally participate in church activities but do not fully belong.
- The *de-churched* are those who have some familiarity with church but do not generally find

churches attractive or amenable.

- The *pre-churched* are those with no prior experience of church, for whom church culture is alien and church language incomprehensible.
- The *post-churched* are those who have, for various reasons and often after years of involvement, decided to leave the church.
- The *anti-churched* are those with personal or ideological objections to church culture and maybe also to Christianity.

This language is problematic, not least in its omission of any reference to other faith communities and its Christendom-oriented assumption that ‘churched’ is the cultural norm, rather than a counter-cultural experience. And it categorises attitudes towards church rather than Christian faith (belonging rather than believing). But it offers a heuristic guide to the diverse attitudes of those with whom churches are hoping to engage. However, as post-Christendom advances, the first two categories will shrink dramatically. This has serious implications for churches whose evangelistic strategies concentrate on the diminishing number of semi-churched and de-churched people who might respond to attractational approaches.

In post-Christendom, incarnational cross-cultural mission strategies will be needed to reach increasing numbers of pre-churched and anti-churched people. So we must stop relying on ‘this-is-the-answer’ and ‘one-size-fits-all’ evangelism packages. And our churches must be communities where those who believe can belong. Imaginative, courageous and culturally attuned churches will be needed to connect with those who are now distant and alienated from church.

Belonging, believing and behaving

Later chapters will examine many implications of developing such mission strategies and churches. Here we consider four further dimensions of believing, belonging and behaving in post-Christendom.

Centred-set churches

The ‘centred-set’ model is popular in many emerging churches and various strategists advocate it. They contrast this favourably with the ‘bounded-set’ model, which has clear boundaries and maintains the integrity of a community by excluding any whose beliefs or behaviour are unacceptable. They present less often two other models: the ‘fuzzy set’, which has ill-defined boundaries and builds a more flexible community, although still ensuring coherence through boundary-maintenance; and the ‘open set’ where there are neither boundaries nor a definite centre.

The centred set appeals to churches wanting to encourage belonging before believing. It resonates with a postmodern culture where the notion of boundaries is uncongenial. However, unless all four models are considered, the centred set can be confused with either the fuzzy-set or the open-set models. This makes it less attractive to those who are concerned about the integrity of the church’s beliefs and behaviour. If churches imagine that communities can thrive without core values or guiding convictions, the centred-set model can be dangerous.

If we advocate the centred set for church after Christendom, we must clarify what this does and does not mean. We can do this by contrasting it with ecclesial models from the Christendom era.

Christendom as a culture was a bounded set, maintained by strict control structures to ensure everyone within its boundaries believed and behaved correctly and by political or military action to defend it against those who did not belong. However, within the boundaries of Christendom the parish church was an open set – all parishioners were welcome, in many periods required, to attend.

Questions were asked about behaviour or belief only in flagrant cases. The ensuing doctrinal and moral corruption provoked dissent from outraged Christians, some of whom formed alternative churches on the fringes of Christendom. Eventually it sparked the Reformation and, especially among Anabaptists and Calvinists, a more disciplined approach to community.

The open set is wonderfully inclusive but undisciplined. Without a strong centre, this cannot foster attractive or sustainable community. It survived in the church-friendly bounded culture of Christendom, but it will not do for post-Christendom churches.

Dissenters and some reformers introduced bounded-set churches, although they drew the boundaries differently. For Calvin, the boundary included the entire population in a reformed city; for Anabaptists and medieval dissidents, the boundary distinguished those who belonged to believers' churches from the outside world. Many evangelical and charismatic/Pentecostal churches today endorse and apply this approach.

The bounded set can certainly create and sustain communities, in which beliefs are clearly articulated, behaviour is prescribed and people know they belong. Bounded-set churches attract those who feel secure within boundaries and may be refuges for some beleaguered and disoriented Christians after Christendom. But churches that intend to operate as culturally attuned missional communities, rather than survivalist groups, may find this model restrictive and unappealing.

In the twentieth century, as Christendom waned and Christian beliefs and behaviour slipped further and further out of sync with contemporary culture, many churches adopted the fuzzy set. Although these had boundaries, those who belonged (or wanted to belong) could disbelieve many aspects of Christianity and behave in ways that were more consistent with contemporary norms than traditional values and expectations – but remain members of the church. There were limits to such deviations, but it was often unclear where these boundaries were.

Some found this liberal approach attractive – especially those who found bounded-set churches oppressive – but fuzzy-set churches have not thrived. This is an inherently unstable model, prone either to develop into the insipid and unsustainable open set or to revert surreptitiously to the bounded set, excluding those who challenge its culture and assumptions. Intolerant liberalism is as unattractive as other forms of intolerance. Churches after Christendom will need to do better than this.

Those who advocate centred-set churches must beware open-set or fuzzy-set models masquerading as such. Some churches that claim to be centred-set communities have not really understood the model. The centred-set church has distinctive features:

- It has a definite centre, comprising non-negotiable core convictions, rooted in the story which has shaped the community – and ultimately in Jesus Christ.
- This centre is the focal point, around which members of the community gather enthusiastically.
- Its core convictions shape the church and separate it from other communities in a plural and contested culture.
- The church expends its energy on maintaining the core rather than patrolling boundaries.
- Confidence in its core convictions frees the church to be inclusive, hospitable and open to others, who are welcome to explore the community.
- Those who 'belong' are moving towards the centre, however near or far away they currently are in terms of belief or behaviour.
- This is a dynamic rather than a static model, suitable for communities living towards a vision and missional churches that anticipate constant interaction with others.

Centred-set churches can be as inclusive as open-set churches, as relaxed as fuzzy-set churches and as committed to convictions as bounded-set churches. They value the attractive elements of the other models but configure these differently. Centred-set churches encourage spiritual growth, theological investigation, intellectual honesty, receptivity to new ideas and new people, and a 'journeying' image of discipleship.

But they have a definite centre – from which a boundary emerges. Paul Hiebert explains: 'while centered sets are not created by drawing boundaries, they do have sharp boundaries that separate things inside the set from those outside it – between things related to or moving towards the center and those that are not. Centered sets are well-formed, just like bounded sets. They are formed by defining the center and any relationships to it. The boundary then emerges automatically.'

Churches with healthy centres are secure enough to welcome those who are exploring faith and searching for authenticity. They are relaxed, non-judgemental communities where questions, doubts, dissent and fears can be expressed, and where ethical issues do not preclude acceptance. They are inclusive without compromising, communities with deep convictions that are nevertheless open to fresh insights, churches that allow and encourage critical engagement with beliefs and behaviour but test everything by its congruence with their founding story.

Is this model a legitimate way of describing the community that travelled with Jesus? He invited people to follow him, to become disciples and commit themselves to the vision and values of God's kingdom, but to remain open to others and to fresh insights rather than thinking they had arrived. Is it the model operating in Acts 11 as Peter and the Jerusalem church assess his experience in light of their core convictions and the life and teaching of Jesus? This principled flexibility allows them to weigh up Peter's report, welcome Cornelius and debate what counter-cultural discipleship might mean for Gentiles. Will post-Christendom churches find the centred-set model liberating and sustaining?

Conversion

Acts 11 records a double conversion – not only Cornelius and his household, but also Peter and the Jerusalem church. This conversion was transformational for Cornelius *and* for the mission of a hitherto Jewish church. Conversion involves a paradigm shift, a new way of seeing the world. Whenever mission involves evangelism rather than proselytism (imposing our norms), double conversions like this will occur.

Conversion is another biblical dynamic the Christendom shift has distorted. Sensitive Christians shy away from this terminology, aware that it connotes pressure to conform to particular beliefs and behaviour and implies submission to the superior wisdom and righteousness of those already 'converted'. Conversion historically has often meant an imperialistic (and sometimes coercive) demand for obedience to the institutions, creed and ethical norms of a dominant church. Despite Christendom's demise, pre-packaged theology, condescending approaches and assumptions that converts will conform to the predilections of the evangelist have continued to plague evangelism. Conversion is unidirectional.

This history has bequeathed an unhelpful legacy. The evening before this chapter was written, a woman who had asked for baptism reported that her adult son was coming to the service. But he had made it clear he 'did not want to be converted'! What was he afraid the church might try to do to him? He had no previous church involvement, and knew nothing of the history of Christendom, but he had a negative perception of conversion.

But the understandable aversion of Christians and others to conversion language must not preclude the recovery in post-Christendom churches of an authentic biblical emphasis on conversion. There are dangers here. Does 'belonging before believing' delay indefinitely questions of ultimate allegiance? Do process evangelism courses downplay the crisis of decisive commitment to Jesus Christ as lord? Do centred-set churches imply no paradigm shift is necessary for those who would follow Jesus?

Christendom also distorted conversion by assuming everyone born into a 'Christian' society was automatically Christian. Conversion was unnecessary: all that was needed was 'confirmation' of what had been assumed since birth. In post-Christendom this fiction is unsustainable. Even those born into Christian families and nurtured in the faith from infancy will face increasingly stark choices between social norms that are no longer remotely Christian and counter-cultural Christian discipleship.

Churches after Christendom will need a robust but chastened theology of conversion. Invitations to follow Jesus must be winsome rather than overbearing. And they must imply an ongoing journey of discipleship for those issuing as well as receiving such invitations. Conversion is a paradigm shift that stimulates new ways of thinking and living, not arrival at a pre-determined destination. Conversion is multidirectional and lifelong.

This understanding of conversion changes the tone and content of evangelism. Peter's vision, the shock to his theology it represented and his encounter with Cornelius affected his message. His opening words – 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right' – are humble, grateful and directed as much to himself as to Cornelius.

The testimony of the New Testament, pre-Christendom churches and later dissenting groups is consistent: conversion is crucial for building Christian communities. Post-Christendom churches will disavow the Christendom distortions and welcome the opportunity to recover a gracious but radical understanding of conversion.

Behaving

Conversion is about believing and belonging. It involves commitment to a story and a community. But it is also about behaving in ways that are congruent with this story and strengthen the life and witness of this community. 'Behaving' has intruded occasionally into this chapter, but it features less often in most conversations about church and mission than 'believing' and 'belonging'.

This is another Christendom legacy: providing people assented to the required beliefs and demonstrated they belonged by reasonably frequent church attendance, behaviour was investigated only if it became scandalous or socially damaging. Catechesis (now drastically reduced from its pre-Christendom expression) concentrated on doctrine and liturgy, not ethics. Ethical teaching tended to be derived from the Old Testament rather than the life and teaching of Jesus. Christian behaviour was equated with social conformity.

But church after Christendom dare not ignore 'behaving'. In a sceptical culture, faith must be lived if it is to be believed. In a culture moving away from both residual Christian values and distorted Christendom patterns, churches have new opportunities and responsibilities to incarnate the gospel authentically. This does not mean legalism or moralism (predictable but unhelpful reactions to the demise of Christendom), but counter-cultural churches that live out the attractive but provocative implications of the story they proclaim.

This may require a 'Christendom detox' that flushes out of the system attitudes and practices that hinder authentic discipleship. Another component may be a thorough induction process, whereby converts learn to follow Jesus. Catechesis is making a comeback. The Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* has been a major step towards this, and several process evangelism courses also function as induction courses for converts (and refresher courses for others), exploring subjects catechesis traditionally covered. *Emmaus* is the most extensive, but *Alpha* began as a course for new believers rather than an evangelism course.

Post-Christendom catechesis will require more than induction courses – even courses that explore 'behaving' in far greater depth than any course currently available. It will mean rehearsing the 'big story' and core values of the community, so these are deeply internalised. It may include a form of cultural exorcism, confronting the norms of a cynical, individualistic, patriarchal, consumerist culture, built on global injustice and sustained by institutional violence. And it will involve mentoring, apprenticeship and accountability processes.

This does not mean reinventing bounded-set churches. Believing, belonging and behaving are not separate stages but different dimensions of the journey on which all followers of Jesus are pilgrims. Progress in one dimension precipitates progress in others. Belonging influences what we believe and how we behave. Believing changes our behaviour and deepens our belonging. Behaving enhances our identity with the community and undergirds what we believe. Post-Christendom churches will be messy communities where belonging, believing and behaving are in process rather than neatly integrated.

Learning to behave as Christians is an aspect of conversion and similarly lifelong and multidirectional. Induction offers learning opportunities for all involved: questions new converts raise challenge the assumptions and behaviour of older Christians. The conversion of Cornelius put new issues on the agenda for Jewish Christians. Initially they pondered what behaviour to require of Gentile converts and devised a provisional answer (Acts 15: 5, 19-20). In due course this would help them differentiate between cultural norms and ethical behaviour applicable to all Christians. Post-Christendom churches will relish the opportunity *both* to induct converts into the story of Jesus and the values of his upside-down kingdom *and* to receive their help in identifying areas of inconsistency and compromise in their own communities.

Membership

In centred-set churches where belonging, believing and behaving are in flux, is there any room for a category of 'members'? Is there any difference between 'belonging' and 'membership'?

As Steven Croft notes, 'member' derives from *membrum* 'which means "a limb or part of the body"...a very strong and close way of belonging.' But 'member' today sounds institutional and many find this terminology unhelpful. In a post-commitment culture, membership (however defined) is problematic, not only for churches, but for many organisations. Post-Christendom churches will need categories and terminology that are culturally attuned – but also counter-cultural.

The single category of membership (differentiating members from non-members) is unwieldy, static and exclusive in centred-set churches, where more nuanced, dynamic and inclusive concepts are operative. Post-Christendom churches may need various categories of belonging:

- Flexible and relational, rather than institutional, categories.
- Categories that encourage expressions of commitment consistent with changing beliefs and behaviour.
- Inclusive rather than exclusive categories that refer to core values rather than boundaries.

- Categories coherent with our identity as pilgrims who respond haltingly but hopefully to Jesus' call to follow him.

John Drane's proposal was mentioned in *Post-Christendom*: a 'stakeholder model, in which there could and would be a place for diverse groups of people, who might be at different stages in their journey of faith, but who would be bound together by their commitment to one another and to the reality of the spiritual search, rather than by inherited definitions of institutional membership.'

But centred-set churches need custodians of their story and values. Inclusivity and open-ended belonging without core maintenance is unsustainable and dangerous, as membership-averse emerging churches are discovering. Other emerging churches are reconfiguring monastic patterns that establish a core community and allow for various stages of commitment to their core values. Nigel Wright, affirming diverse forms of belonging, warns that a church is 'unlikely to endure unless at its core there are those who commit themselves on a *covenantal* basis'. He proposes an open 'community membership' and a 'core membership' open to those who accept its demands.

This is where baptism intersects centred-set ecclesiology. Baptising infants assumes an open set and is inappropriate for centred-set churches. Baptising those who, like Cornelius, respond to the gospel fits much better. Baptism marks the point at which someone covenants to believe in Jesus, belong to the church and behave in ways that are consistent with its core values.

The complex relationship between belonging, believing and behaving will reappear in subsequent chapters. We turn next to the dislocation between believing and belonging evident in the stories of many Christians who have left churches in recent years. If this flow is not stemmed, discussions about post-Christendom churches may be academic.