

Christendom and Post-Christendom

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Part 1: The Rise and Fall of Christendom

A. The Rise of Christendom

In the early years of the fourth century the Roman Empire was in turmoil. After centuries of dominance, the empire was showing signs of age - the bureaucracy was creaking, moral standards were low, the old forms of religion seemed empty, and barbarians were attacking the frontiers.

Despite almost three hundred years of marginality and intermittent persecution, and despite still being an illegal society, the church was one of the few remaining stabilising and civilising influences. Their sacrificial care for victims during a recent outbreak of plague had won them 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, and most of Italy, but Constantine held most of the Western empire, had the support of most of the army and had marched on Rome. In October 312, he was camped north of the city preparing for what would be the show-down with his rival, but worried because he did not have the resources to sustain a long siege.

Then something unusual happened. According to Christian writers of the time, Constantine 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, who came from a family of sun-worshippers, had the sign of the cross painted on his soldiers' equipment.

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 fourth century, Christianity had become the state religion, the only legal religion, and it was pagans who were being persecuted.

The system known as christianitas (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.

B. The Christendom Shift

Two opposite assessments have been made of what happened in the fourth 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.

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 the relegation of the laity to a largely passive role;
- Obligatory church attendance, with penalties for non-compliance;
- The practice of 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 Constantinian 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 fourth century onwards both 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 the church was associated with the Christian status quo and had vested interests in maintaining it. The church provided religious legitimation for state activities; the state provided secular force to back up ecclesiastical decisions.

Supporters of Christendom have argued that this system enabled the lordship of Christ to be exercised over every aspect of society and that it demonstrated the triumph of the gospel. Enthusiastic church leaders spoke of the fulfilment of the Great Commission and of the arrival of the millennium. This was the basis of the early church historian, Eusebius' approval of Constantine, whose biography he wrote.

More recently, Abraham Kuyper has expressed similar approval of this development:

'When the first contest eventuated in this that the emperor bowed to Jesus, then... the kingship of Christ began to be triumphant in society... The kingship of Christ from this time on stood as a direction-giving power above the imperial power, which, in order to strengthen its influence, tried for an ever-increasingly close integration with the kingship of Jesus... When in the fourth century persecution ceased and the imperial power evinced a readiness to accommodate itself to Jesus, the basic victory became apparent... This principal victory continued on during the entire course of the long period known as the Middle Ages.'

But opponents of Christendom have considered that this 'victory' was achieved at the expense of surrendering on many important issues and have judged that, in fact, Christianity had been conquered and domesticated. Rather than society being sanctified, the church had been secularised. They have pointed out that it is not easy to fit into the Constantinian framework certain key elements of the Christianity of the New Testament and the first three centuries. Constantinian thinking 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 through military conquest of 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 supra-historical or future realm;
- The church abandons its prophetic role in society in favour of a role that is primarily priestly, providing spiritual support for groups and individuals and 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.

Some contemporary writers have expressed agreement with the negative view of Christendom held by generations of dissidents. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, wrote that for this apparent victory:

'The church had to pay a high price: it had to take over the role of the political religion... Now the church was there for everyone. Its mission reached everywhere. But as what? It reached everyone only as a component part of the political order - as the state religion of the political government.'

Vinoth Ramachandra argues:

'A movement that proclaimed grace and practised justice, a faith that had at its centre a crucified man as the hope of human and cosmic transformation, could not have been converted to a religious civilization like any other without serious damage to its very essence.'

Others have suggested that the church had no option in the fourth century but to accept imperial endorsement, and that Christendom, despite its excesses, was a providential means of christianising culture and advancing God's kingdom. Lesslie Newbigin has concluded:

'How else, at that moment of history, could the Church have expressed its faithfulness to the gospel which is a message about the universal reign of God? It is hard to see what other possibility there was at that moment. The experiment of a Christian political order had to be made.'

C. The Fall of Christendom

It is time to ask an important question that we need to ask whenever we study the Bible, theology or church history: so what? What is the legacy of the Christendom era? How are the story of Constantine and the Christendom shift relevant to us today? In the remaining parts of this study I want to explore three areas where the Christendom legacy remains

significant and, I will argue, problematic. These three areas are: the way we interpret the Bible, the way we engage in mission and the way we do church.

But let me finish Part 1 by making two points. For, however Christendom is evaluated, two things are becoming increasingly clear.

First, the long era of Christendom is coming to an end. Evidence is accumulating of a second shift, the transition from Christendom to a post-Christendom situation. The percentage of the population attending state churches in most European nations is now very small. Frequent calls are heard, even within state churches, for disestablishment, for abolition of or changes to the parish system and the practice of infant baptism, and for recognition that a new era is dawning. Few missiologists 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.

Alan Roxburgh writes: *"The fourth and twentieth centuries form bookends marking transition points in the history of the church. Just as the fourth century adoption of Christianity by Constantine forced the church to struggle with its self-understanding as the new center of the culture, twentieth century Christians must now struggle to understand the meaning of their social location in a decentered world."*

Given its long history in Europe and its all-pervasive nature, the fall of Christendom is unlikely to be sudden or total. Even when the official relationship between church and state is dissolved, the Christendom mindset within the churches (and to some extent also within society) will persist and many will seek a return to a supposedly more Christian society. But there is no way back. Our task is to reject nostalgia and rise to the challenges of Christian discipleship in a different kind of culture. As we will see in the next three parts of this study, there are real difficulties in this situation, but there are also great opportunities.

Second, I have just used the phrase "Christendom mindset". It is a mindset rather than a political arrangement that is 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 fourth and sixteenth centuries, and increasingly in the last five centuries, has this mindset been challenged.

This mindset has deeply affected the way European Christians have interpreted the Bible, done theology, thought about mission and 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, a very different mindset. 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 workshops will just be a sample of the kinds of things we will need to explore. But we are not alone. We have as conversation-partners

the pre-Christendom churches that also operated from the margins, the marginal dissident movements that challenged the Christendom mindset, and the God of the Bible who so often seems to operate, not from the centre, but from the margins.

Part 2: Christendom and Biblical Interpretation

A. Introduction

In the first part of this series we examined the emergence of Christendom, identified some of its defining features, considered different assessments of this system, reflected briefly on its gradual demise and argued that we need to examine critically the Christendom mindset that continues to influence the way we think. In this part we will look at the important area of biblical interpretation, asking how the Christendom mindset has influenced the way the Bible was interpreted and applied, what alternatives there were in that area, and how we might interpret the Bible in post-Christendom.

One important proviso that must be noted as we proceed, however, is that the division of church history thus far into the three eras of pre-Christendom, Christendom and post-Christendom is to adopt a Eurocentric perspective. Since this summer school is taking place in Europe and our concern here is primarily with biblical interpretation, mission and church life in Britain, this perspective may not be inappropriate, but we need to recognise:

- The story of European Christendom is only part of the story of the church, and our language needs to reflect this. Thus we might rewrite Alan Roxburgh's comment quoted towards the end of the last part as follows: "The fourth and twentieth centuries form bookends marking transition points in the history of the church in Europe."
- It has been claimed that in the Middle Ages the Christian community in Asia was more extensive, both numerically and geographically, than European Christendom. It is certainly possible that the experience of these Asian communities as missionary minority groups in a pluralistic, multi-religious context might have significant lessons to teach Christians today in a not dissimilar context today.
- The pervasive and persistent bias towards a Eurocentric perspective on church history (and many other subjects) must be challenged - both to do justice to the full story and in recognition that the centre of gravity of the global church is no longer in Europe but in the southern hemisphere. Many of the interesting developments in biblical interpretation, mission and ecclesiology are taking place in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

So, as we explore biblical interpretation, mission and ecclesiology, we need not only to reflect on the influence of Christendom but also listen to other voices from beyond Christendom - communities who lived before the Christendom shift, communities from areas of the globe that Christendom did not reach, and communities on the edges of Christendom who rejected the Christendom mindset (often at great cost). If we are now a

church on the margins of society, we may find most help from conversations with other marginal communities of today and yesterday. In this section we will refer in passing to these various perspectives, but we will have time only to listen to one set of marginal voices - the dissenting groups on the edges of Christendom.

B. Christendom and Biblical Interpretation

The Christendom system and the mindset that went with it have deeply impacted the way European Christians interpreted the Bible through the centuries. Having accepted the support of the political authorities, and having interpreted this support as divinely providential, the church under Christendom 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 legitimise the existing social order that benefited both church and state, not in ways that might offer a prophetic challenge to this system. Furthermore, the dominant and central position of the church within society significantly affected the presuppositions with which 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.

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 dissident movements. Those who dared to challenge the Christendom mindset usually did so because they had begun to interpret the Bible in different and (to their opponents) socially dangerous ways. This was how dissident 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 legitimate 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 approach to the Bible energised their protest against Christendom, and their protest against Christendom energised their different approach to 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. Mainstream European Christianity was dominated by the Christendom mindset and this mindset dominated biblical interpretation.

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 New Testament ethics, so on all kinds of issues Old Testament norms were adopted for all except the clergy and the monastic orders.

Church leaders also realised that the New Testament provided no useful guidelines for organising the kind of sacral society or hierarchical church that was emerging in the fourth century. Apparently, the triumph of Christianity had not been envisaged and no guidelines were provided for running a state religion. But again they found many helpful structures in the Old Testament. The nation of Israel seemed analogous to the christianised Roman Empire: both had borders to defend, armies to run, economic policies to determine, social institutions to maintain and a cultural heritage to value. Both recognised the ultimate government of God, exercised through his chosen and anointed leaders. 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 eschatological kingdom, or as unreachable ideals. The resultant changes in biblical interpretation became established as orthodox and provided constant reinforcement of the system. Not surprisingly, therefore, the model of church that operated within Christendom seemed to its critics in the dissident movements to be an Old Testament model. Their persistent calls for a restoration of New Testament models of church and discipleship expressed both their dissatisfaction with the way in which this model operated and their disagreement as to its basic legitimacy.

In particular, the increasing distance between Jesus' lifestyle and that of many church leaders necessitated a marginalisation of the humanity and teaching of Jesus. It was no longer acceptable to see him as the example that Christians should imitate, at least in terms of their responsibilities as citizens. Furthermore, some of his teaching was very difficult to apply in this new situation: how did a Christian emperor love his enemies? How could a Christian politician "take no thought for tomorrow"? The Sermon on the Mount especially presented problems: perhaps it should be interpreted as relevant only for interpersonal relationships rather than public life, or regarded as a wonderful but unattainable ideal in this age? In time, such teachings were regarded as "counsels of perfection", applicable to monks rather than guidelines for normal discipleship. A two-tier system (similar to the clergy/laity distinction) was emerging.

The problem went deeper still. For state Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, who not only taught radical discipleship rather than patriotic citizenship but who was executed by the state, was difficult to assimilate. Fundamentally embarrassing for Christendom was the fact that Jesus had been crucified by the order of the Roman Empire, acting through Pilate, its representative. The cross that Constantine put on the shields of his soldiers did not make a good symbol for a state religion. The dangerous memory of what Jesus said and did, his dealings with political and religious authorities, his championing of the poor and criticism of injustice: these elements were not helpful in a situation where church leaders were becoming politicians and supporters of the status quo. Somehow, the connection between the radical Jesus and fourth century Christianity had to be loosened. Consequently, in the fourth century, Jesus was recast as a celestial figure, his divinity was emphasised and the dangerous memory of the Nazarene was allowed to fade.

This change in the way Jesus was understood and the Bible was interpreted is evident from an analysis of fourth century creeds, hymns, church calendars and catechisms. In the

hymns the churches sung, in the sermons preached, in the teaching given to catechumens, as well as in theological treatises, Jesus and his teaching are given less and less attention.

- The catechetical instructions of Ambrose, for example, are based on Old Testament morality (see Ambrose, *De Mysteriis*, 1.1); whereas catechumens used to be taught to apply Jesus' teachings (see Justin, *Apology*, 1:14-16; or the *Didache*, Ch. 1-6).
- Fourth century sermons and writings demonstrate the same reinterpretation of what the Bible taught: the life of Christ was now used devotionally rather than ethically.
- These same sermons demonstrate the impact on biblical interpretation of the disappearance of the distinction between church and world. Major New Testament themes such as the kingdom of God no longer seemed significant. The Great Commission seemed to have been fulfilled. The context of the early Christians seemed so removed from Christendom that it was difficult to understand New Testament teaching on many issues. The blurring of the distinction between church and world resulted in New Testament passages such as Romans 13 being interpreted in ways that reflected the requirements of Christendom.
- This marginalising of Jesus is most evident in the creeds. During the fourth and fifth centuries, attempts were made to summarise what Christians believed about the fundamental matters of faith. These creeds have had tremendous influence on the way in which Christians have thought about God, Jesus, the church and many other matters. But they were developed in the formative years of Christendom, when Jesus was being marginalised, and this shows through.

Exercise

Consider the Nicene Creed, the origins of which were in a conference at Nicaea in 325, chaired by the emperor Constantine, whose main concern was not theology but having a united church in his empire. The creed says quite a bit about Jesus, but what it does not say is just as important.

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds: God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary; and was made man.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered; and was buried. And the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven; and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke through the prophets.

And I believe in one catholic and apostolic church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The creed affirms that he is both divine and human but manages to ignore everything important about his human life, moving straight from his birth to his death. Where are his miracles, his relationships, his example, his teachings, his lifestyle? As in so many other fourth century documents, where is Jesus?

The Christocentrism of the New Testament writers and the early churches is replaced by a theological system in which the life of Jesus seems to be of marginal importance. Of course, he was still honoured as Saviour and risen Lord, but the human Jesus (his example, lifestyle, teachings and relationships) was quietly ignored. He just did not fit the new arrangement, he was too awkward, too challenging, too threatening.

Christendom could cope with the divine Jesus and with a belief that Jesus was also human, but it could not cope with the reality of that human life. Though the creeds insist on his humanity, this seems little more than an abstract philosophical principle, unconnected to his way of life, relationships, teaching and miracles. The Jesus whom the churches expressed their faith in as they repeated the creeds was an exalted figure, a heavenly counterpart of the Christian emperor, remote and powerful, but no longer disturbing the status quo. And this has left a lasting legacy in European Christianity and in the way the Bible is interpreted.

C. Reformation and Biblical Interpretation

This was the situation, both politically and theologically, that faced the Reformers in the sixteenth century. During the past millennium and more, despite the advances in biblical understanding resulting from the work of generations of biblical interpreters and theologians, the Christendom mindset was essentially unchanged and 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 marginalized. Dissent on the important issue of biblical interpretation was dangerous and was quickly quelled, but memories of this alternative legacy lived on.

Some radical movements began simply as attempts to take Jesus seriously and to practise what he taught. The Jesus these groups discovered as they read the Gospels challenged them personally, especially in relation to issues of lifestyle, and also seemed to point to incongruities in the emphases and practices of contemporary church life. The Sermon on the Mount, particularly, seemed to inculcate values and attitudes that were not evident in the churches or their leaders. It also appeared to forbid certain practices that were strongly endorsed by the churches: in particular, participation in killing and the swearing of oaths. And many traditional beliefs and ceremonies seemed to have no basis in the teaching of Jesus: purgatory, infant baptism and praying to the saints, to mention but a few.

The beginning of the Waldensian movement in the conversion experience of Valdes, 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. Valdes' 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 Valdes' part, as the radical implications of Jesus' teachings were contrasted with the social standing, priorities and activities of contemporary churches. Their contemporary opponent, Sacchoni wrote: "The Waldenses despise all those approved practices of the Church, which they do not see written in the Gospel."

Jan Lochman compares the Protestant Reformation, which he calls the "second reformation", with the Waldensian and Hussite movements, which he refers to as the "first reformation". He writes: "It is the Gospels, primarily the Sermon on the Mount, which receives the greatest amount of attention. Without desiring to set up false alternatives, the somewhat simplifying statement could be made: where the second reformation concentrates its theology upon the Pauline message of justification, the first reformation concentrates upon the 'evangelical commandment' of Jesus."

If these groups began with a rediscovery of Jesus and renewed emphasis on following his teaching, other dissenting groups moved gradually towards this position as a result of reading the Bible for themselves and not allowing ecclesiastical traditions to dull its impact. Anne Hudson notes that among the Lollards, although "there is no sign of qualified acceptance only for any of the epistles, such as in the Reformation period led to the characterization of James's epistle as 'an epistle of straw'", nevertheless, "the stress upon the gospels amongst the greater length of the bible as a whole correctly reflects Wyclif's view that the core of the divine message was to be found within the four evangelists." Though he began very differently from Valdes, exploring abstruse metaphysical concepts, Wyclif's writings inspired a movement that ended up taking very similar positions to those of the Waldensians. The position of many Lollard groups on pacifism and not swearing oaths resulted from their determination to take seriously what they believed to be the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

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 interpretive monopoly of 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 wrong foundations challenged the entire system.

What about the "second reformation"? Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and their colleagues advocated a return to the biblical roots and insisted that the Bible, rather than church

traditions, was authoritative. How did they handle biblical interpretation? Did they adopt similar principles to the medieval dissidents?

These Reformers seem to have moved through three stages in their opposition to the Catholic establishment.

- Initially, they criticised blatant abuses, doctrinal errors and immorality without urging schism.
- Gradually they accepted the inevitability of separation and for a while toyed with radical ideas about the nature of the church and its relationship with society (ideas not dissimilar 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.

David Bosch concludes that among these Reformers the relationship between church and state "was redefined in a more nuanced way, yet with little fundamental difference. The old, monolithic Christendom merely gave way to different fragments of Christendom."

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.

- By rejecting the monastic option, they removed the earlier two-tier approach to discipleship, but they did not reassert New Testament teaching as the standard.
- By emphasising justification by faith they focused attention on the New Testament and on Jesus as redeemer, but they would not allow Jesus to be normative for ethics as well as soteriology.
- Though they insisted on the freedom of biblical interpretation from the scrutiny of ecclesiastical or political authorities, in practice they frequently deferred to these authorities.

The Reformers continued to operate with a "hermeneutic of order." This term is used by liberation theologians in Latin America and contrasted unfavourably with what they call a "hermeneutic of justice." José Miguez Bonino wrote: "If we accept this hermeneutical key for an understanding of the theological determination of priorities, then the question of the Constantinian church has to be turned completely around. The true question is not 'what degree of justice...is compatible with the existing order?', but 'what kind of order, which order is compatible with the exercise of justice...?'" The Reformers' approach to the Bible was influenced (some would say distorted) by their wariness of interpretations that might threaten the social, political, ecclesiastical and economic status quo.

It was left to another marginal movement to continue and develop the tradition of the medieval dissidents. The Anabaptists came to realise that reforming the state church system was inadequate and that forming believers' churches was essential. Although the earliest Anabaptists seem to have hoped that a thorough reformation of the state churches might be achieved, 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, 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 Scripture 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 ethics as well as for salvation. The Old Testament might still be relevant within society, but within believers' churches the New Testament governed ecclesiology and ethics.
- 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 and operated not with a hermeneutics of order but with a "hermeneutics of obedience."
- Unlike the Reformers, they were not in a dominant position. Although they were persecuted by others who claimed to be Christians, rather than by an avowedly pagan empire, Anabaptists regarded persecution as incompatible with true Christianity and so saw their experience as analogous to the early Christians: the true church was always liable to such treatment, whatever the lineaments of the persecutors. Their approach to Scripture resembled the approaches of pre-Christendom and persecuted medieval dissident interpreters more than those of the Reformers or most interpreters since Constantine.
- A key element in Anabaptist hermeneutics was its enfranchisement of all believers as interpreters and its insistence that the Bible should be interpreted in the local Christian community. Their confident assertion that Scripture was self-interpreting inspired those who had been intimidated by scholarly and ecclesiastical authority and who were struggling to respond to their new freedom in a less hierarchical setting.

D. Biblical Interpretation in Post-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. The experience of base churches in Latin America endorses this.
- 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 in which Jesus must be understood. New ways of thinking become possible.

- The suspicion of ideological influences found in the radical tradition and its tendency to subject traditional interpretations to critique and reappraisal may be helpful. We may have plenty of unlearning to do as we gradually recognise how much traditional interpretations of 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 ethics and ecclesiology may assist us to rediscover the Jesus whom Christendom marginalised and to question the ways in which the Old Testament was interpreted under Christendom.

It may be that this emphasis on Christocentrism is of the greatest significance in post-Christendom. Christocentrism insists that Jesus is at the centre of Christianity. That the human life of Jesus is vital and cannot be ignored. That Jesus is our model, our pioneer, our leader, our teacher, our example - as well as our redeemer. That he was truly human and that his humanity matters. That the awkward teachings of Jesus are relevant and authoritative in every area of life - in politics as much as in family life, in social policy as well as church life, in economics as well as personal morality. That the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be lived not just admired. That Jesus is the centre of the Bible, the one to whom all the scriptures point, the one through whom all the scriptures must be interpreted. We do not start elsewhere and then try to fit the teaching of Jesus in (or ignore him if this is too awkward). We start with Jesus and interpret everything else in the light of what he models and teaches.

This Christocentric approach affects all kinds of issues. It profoundly challenges the way we worship, evangelise, work, treat creation, run our churches, get involved in society, exercise power etc. It is urgent that we recover this approach. It was this approach that enabled the early churches to turn the world upside down. It was this that challenged their contemporaries and amazed their persecutors. It was this that was lost through the Christendom shift.

But Christendom is dead or dying. We live now in a post-Christendom society and we desperately need to stop thinking in Christendom categories. Europe has decisively rejected the institutional form of Christianity known as Christendom. Arguably it has not yet seen enough of Jesus to decide what to do with him. Perhaps it is time to read the Bible in a new way, to recover the Christocentric approach of the pre-Christendom churches and the marginal movements, to rediscover Jesus for ourselves and to follow him into a world that is heartily sick of Christianity but which might yet be intrigued by Jesus.

Part 3: Christendom and Mission

A. Evangelism has a Bad Name

1. In the last part 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, arguably, most problematic.

2. Most people, if asked, would not want to be evangelised! Why not? The word is about giving someone 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?
3. Brainstorming:
 - (a) What is an evangelist?
 - * manipulator
 - * dishonest
 - * showman
 - * American
 - * eloquent
 - * powerful
 - (b) What is evangelism?
 - * mass meetings
 - * being preached at
 - * proselytism
 - * being accosted
 - * pressurising
 - * emotional hysteria
 - * open air preaching
 - * texts on posters
 - * cultural imperialism
4. Why is evangelism seen in this way? There may be various reasons, including the unhelpful antics and methods of some contemporary evangelists, misrepresentation in the media, insensitivity by enthusiastic but unwise church members, spiritual warfare, etc.
5. But at root the popular perception of evangelism derives from the Christendom era and the Christendom mindset. To justify this claim, we will need to investigate how evangelism was understood in the Christendom centuries and how the Christendom shift impacted evangelism

B. The Reformers and Mission

In the last part, when we looked at biblical interpretation, we spent some time comparing the approach of the sixteenth 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 in this session the impact of the Christendom era and mindset on the subject of mission, we will return to the sixteenth century again 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." "Not a lot of people know that" the reformers did not really see sixteenth-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. Ever since the adoption, early in the fourth 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 had been operating not in mission mode but in maintenance mode, at least within the boundaries of what 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 biblical interpretation and many other aspects of Christian faith and practice. 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.

This revolutionary change is particularly evident in the evangelistic dimension of the church's mission. 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 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.

David Bosch concludes: "it is only in recent decades that the full significance of those events at the beginning of the fourth century has begun to dawn on us. For mission and the understanding of mission the events of those fateful years had equally drastic implications".

Evangelism in its New Testament sense became irrelevant. If the whole empire (with the perennially awkward exception of the Jews) was now "Christian", it was obsolete. The role of the church was to provide pastoral care and teaching, and to 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 committed to supporting, rather than challenging, the status quo. Church leaders declared that, at least within Christian Europe, the Great Commission had been fulfilled.

For over a thousand years this remained the orthodox view, with only marginalised radical groups, like the Waldensians and Lollards, dissenting. Among these groups, the ministries 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, engaged in serious ecclesiological reflection, 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. The Catholics tended to burn them, the Protestants normally beheaded them, but both operated on similar Christendom assumptions and applied similar Christendom methods.

Christendom, of course, survived the challenge represented by Anabaptism. The monolithic 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 cumulative pressure of the Enlightenment, 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. Ecclesiology and missiology were disconnected. David Bosch writes: "The Reformation definitions of the Church were silent on its missionary dimensions. Ecclesiological definitions were almost exclusively preoccupied with matters concerning the purity of doctrine, the sacraments and church discipline. Mission had to content itself with a position on the church's periphery."

C. Christendom Evangelism

Evangelism returned in the latter part 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 tenets 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 perception. In post-Christendom this history has left the churches with a legacy that is at best ambivalent and has left contemporary society with a justifiable suspicion of any kind 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. To a significant degree it never was, but only now are we coming to recognise this. Even now the reasons for our disquiet are not always apparent. If we are to

evangelise our contemporary, post-Christendom society, we will need to understand these reasons and look for a new model of evangelism that is both more consonant with the New Testament and more appropriate for our society.

So 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 allowed or 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. And in many situations 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 as indicated 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.

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 the end of the fourth 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.

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 Christianised Roman Empire than a pagan one. In a unitary culture 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 eradicated any tension between gospel and culture, so that European civilisation was regarded as Christian, and missionaries were disempowered from differentiating between gospel and culture enough to contextualise the gospel into another culture.

The tendency of Christendom evangelists, therefore, was to denigrate 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 indigenous 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 multiple 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 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 generally inculcated conformity to upper or middle class culture. Sin was presented as non-conformity to the values of this culture.

Discussion

Is there really reason to think that these attitudes to evangelism affect the perceptions of evangelism in contemporary society? What about in the churches?

D. Maintenance and Mission

But the legacy of Christendom in the area of mission goes deeper still. Christendom, based on an assumption that Europe was Christian, was essentially oriented towards pastoral care rather than evangelism, or maintenance rather than mission.

One of the tensions evident in many periods of church history is that of maintenance versus mission. The church is both a community and a missionary organisation, an institution and a movement. It is required to give attention both to its internal health and development, and to its external responsibilities of proclamation and service. This balance is not easy to maintain. In general, first generation movements have tended to emphasise mission and to develop only rudimentary structures for maintenance. In the second or third generations, internal developments have predominated. This process of institutionalisation can be observed in all human societies and is necessary if progress is to be maintained and gains consolidated. However, unless this process leads on to renewed mission, the institution that has been created will dwindle, and new forms of mission will be needed, either to replace it or to revive it.

It is not that maintenance is unnecessary. Unless the church develops effective structures for teaching, training, pastoring and deploying those it reaches in mission, it will become progressively less able to continue to engage in mission. Furthermore, unless the church becomes a community of loving relationships and meaningful interaction, there is little to call others to join. Robert Warren has commented: "A church wholly given to 'mission work' is not a sustainable model". The result is exhausting activism and a "sales-addicted organisation". But when maintenance becomes central or all consuming, as it frequently has in European church history, mission has been marginalised and the church has forgotten its *raison d'être*.

A frequent response to the perceived need to engage both in mission and maintenance has been to develop specialist groups to engage in mission with the support of the church. The church in its congregational and institutional form is thereby freed to concentrate on maintenance, and church members who are able and willing to engage in mission activities can be seconded to these groups. From the Celtic mission bands and medieval monastic orders, to the plethora of contemporary missionary societies, there is a long and honourable history of such organisations. The globalisation of the church, and its evangelistic and social impact on human society, would not have been achieved without them. But some missiologists have questioned the legitimacy of this division of roles, especially if these structures do not interact effectively.

Anabaptist missiologist George Peters argues that the history of Protestant missions is predominantly the history of missionary societies and individual pioneers, rather than the church in mission. He attributes this development among Protestants to four features of the sixteenth century Reformation: the absence of a coherent missiology among the Reformers; their failure to establish churches free from state control; the teaching of some Reformers that mission was the responsibility of individuals rather than the churches; and their inability, due to the low spiritual state of their churches, to engage in mission. He describes this as "an unfortunate and abnormal historic development which has produced autonomous, missionless churches on the one hand and autonomous churchless missionary societies on the other hand".

Others have argued that this diversification of roles is not just a pragmatic solution to persistent institutional inertia, but a theologically sound and biblically justified strategy. Ralph Winter does not accept that mission agencies are unfortunate and abnormal, describing them instead as one of the "two structures of God's redemptive mission". He

argues that from New Testament times both structures have been crucial for the church to fulfil its calling. Although Winter acknowledges that, at times, the partnership necessary for both structures to operate effectively has been lacking, he insists that this division of labour is appropriate and divinely ordained.

How does this analysis of maintenance and mission, congregations and mission agencies apply to the Christendom era?

- The church in Christendom essentially operated in maintenance mode and lost interest in mission, regarding it as inappropriate or unnecessary.
- When the church in the latter years of the Christendom era recovered a sense of mission, it tended to operate by separating church and mission agencies.
- But there were dissident groups who refused to accept the irrelevance of mission and who operated as missionary communities, refusing to separate church and mission.

These dissident groups functioned as renewal movements, calling the institution back to its missionary roots, and redressing the balance between maintenance and mission. The Lollards, Waldensians, Anabaptists and many other such movements operated as missionary churches, holding together mission and community, refusing to leave mission to specialist agencies. They have reminded the church that its primary task is to engage in mission to the world beyond the church, and that this is the responsibility of the whole church. This task may be fulfilled through diverse structures, but it may not be delegated to a minority of enthusiasts.

Whether this task is performed through two structures or one, mission is no longer a subsidiary point on the agenda, or something that can be delegated to a subsection of the church - it is the agenda, and the whole church shares responsibility for this task.

E. Mission in Post-Christendom

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

- Churches under Christendom, as we have seen, operated in "pastoral mode", but in post-Christendom culture they must operate in "mission mode". This will require a paradigm shift, whereby mission is not bolted on to church programmes but is recovered as the purpose of the church. "Missionary congregation" has been the term used to signal the shift required. Impetus was given by the 1988 Lambeth conference calling for "a shift to a dynamic missionary emphasis" in Anglican churches. Robert Warren, in his books, *Being Human, Being Church and Building Missionary Congregations*, has begun to explore the implications of this shift and to make recommendations for its achievement. He defines the concept in these words: "A missionary congregation is a church which takes its identity, priorities, and agenda, from participation in God's mission in the world."
- It is vital to recognise that a post-Christendom society is not the same as a pre-Christendom society. Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that modern society is "a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar." Similarly 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. Evangelism in a post-Christendom context is faced with the task not just of persuading people that Christianity is true but of even gaining a hearing for something widely regarded as passé.
- Strategic planning is essential and radical changes are needed in the training and job descriptions of church leaders. Lesslie Newbigin writes: "It is frequently said that the Church in Britain is now in a missionary situation. It is not clear that the full meaning of this has been understood. We have lived for so many centuries in the 'Christendom' situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations. In a situation of declining numbers, the policy has been to abandon areas (such as the inner cities) where active Christians are few and to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in the places where there are enough Christians to support them. Needless to say, this simply accelerates the decline. It is the opposite of a missionary strategy, which would proceed in the opposite direction - deploying ministers in the areas where Christian presence is weakest."
- 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 context: 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; the churches may find freedom from the distorting influence of wealth, power, coercion and status that distracted them under Christendom;

What, then, might characterise mission in a post-Christendom society?

- 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.

Discussion

To what extent is your church a "missionary congregation"? Make recommendations to encourage it to move further in this direction.