

# Speaking Christianly as a missional activity in the midst of Babel: Christian living as the exegesis of the gospel proclamation after the end of history

Within the contemporary western Church talk about mission is often dominated by strategising. The Church, driven by a pragmatism that is itself definitive of western culture, searches for the strategy that will cause mass conversion. If the right strategy, if the right words, can be found then revival will occur. The good news must be translated into the language of the culture so that it can be accessible, and so that the ranks of a dying Church can be swelled.

This article will argue that missional strategies that present the Christian gospel in language that is understandable to western culture are bound to fail. When the Church uses the language of western culture to proclaim the gospel, cultural definitions co-opt the Christian meaning and the only result can be cultural Christianity. Moreover, within the contemporary society, language has been significantly devalued and Christian attempts to speak culturally are merely surrendering to, and participating within, the structures of Babel. Therefore, if the western Church hopes to be missional, it must learn to speak Christianly in the midst of Babel. Instead of changing the gospel message the Church must

proclaim the gospel in its original form and allow the way it lives to interpret that message. The Christian message cannot simply be employed

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to provide Christian living with cultural approval. Instead Christian living, coupled with faith in the Holy Spirit, ought to provide the content and meaning of the Christian message. When Christianity is proclaimed in this way then the Church will be equipped to reveal a radical new

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way of being human in the midst of a western culture dominated by the idols of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy.

**The current situation**  
**The fall of Christendom and the end of history**  
In the last half century much has

changed for the Church in the western world. Social, political, economic, demographic, and philosophical upheavals have occurred, and as a result the Church finds itself in a new and unfamiliar situation. Within this new situation the Church is in a place of increasing marginality. It no longer exercises the power and influence it once had over western society. The Church is not only increasingly powerless, it is also less and less interesting to the western world. An increasing impotence is coupled with an increasing irrelevance.

Karl Rahner, a German theologian, recognised this changing situation long before many in North America.<sup>1</sup> Rahner realised that socially constituted traditional Christianity would soon exist only as a remnant. This is not the result of some divine act, nor the outworking of some sinister force (or a decline in genuine conversions). Rather it is the natural result of the disappearance of the preconditions that produce that particular kind of faith and Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Rahner says, “the formerly homogeneous Christian character of society as such was the result of and

an element in the unity and homogeneousness [sic] of secular society.”<sup>3</sup> Society has changed, and the Church too will change. Things will not exist as they existed formerly.<sup>4</sup>

Fifteen years later Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon recognised this situation in America and announced that Christendom had come to an end.<sup>5</sup> Somewhat tongue-in-cheek they argue that Christendom finally fell one evening in 1963 when the Fox movie theatre in Greenville North Carolina opened for business on Sunday.<sup>6</sup> Since that time Christians have been increasingly awakening to the fact that the world is no longer “our world.”<sup>7</sup> However, this is a fact that Hauerwas and Willimon celebrate. The fall of Christendom has opened the door for new and exciting ways of living Christianly.<sup>8</sup>

As the homogeneity of Christendom has been replaced with a swirl of plurality, as metanarratives have been discarded in favour of new tribalisms, as certainty has been pushed to the margins by scepticism and relativism, it has become difficult to

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name the empire that has replaced Christendom. Instead of one empire it seems that there are a thousand empires swirling together, and each individual has become an emperor. In attempting to label this situation many have described this as the shift from modernism to postmodernism. In the midst of these changes it is argued that diversity has triumphed, not any one philosophy, religion, ideology, or worldview.

However, such an approach may be slightly naïve. In the same year that Hauerwas and Willimon were celebrating the end of Christendom, Francis Fukuyama (then Deputy Director of the U.S. State Department’s policy planning staff) was announcing the end of history.<sup>9</sup>

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History, in the Hegelian sense of humanity striving for a social form that met its deepest and most fundamental longings, had come to an end. Fukuyama hailed western liberal democracies and free-market capitalism as the *telos* of humanity’s ideological evolution. The fall of communism and the defeat of fascism, coupled with the impotence of organised religion and nationalism, signalled the total exhaustion of all viable systemic alternatives.<sup>10</sup> After the fall of Christendom, amidst the swirl and plurality of the postmodern world, the ideology of liberal democracies based on free-market capitalism, reigns supreme.

**The subversion of Christianity**  
The radical changes in the western world have caused many to re-examine the Church as it existed within Christendom. Many are paying increasing attention to voices that have come from the margins, inside and outside of the western world. These voices (along with Rahner, Hauerwas and Willimon) argue that the Church of Christendom became a Church that was deeply compromised. Here three of those voices will briefly be examined.

The first of these voices was birthed in Latin America and finds

its expression in the writings of the liberation theologians. The liberation theologians argue that the Church committed to Christendom in the western world (and Jacques Maritain’s “New Christendom” model in Latin America) is a Church that is stained with the blood of the oppressed.<sup>11</sup> By being linked to those who wielded power the Church itself became an oppressor, either actively or passively by refusing to engage in certain activities or dialogues.<sup>12</sup> The fact that many western Christians are unable to see the link between liberation and faith reveals how they have domesticated the gospel that began as “good news” to the poor.<sup>13</sup> One of the consequences of this is the fact that many social revolutionaries and freedom fighters abandoned the church, for “they found in [those] institutions no possibility of realising this commitment, and indeed often had to commit themselves in opposition to the

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church as a society.”<sup>14</sup>

The second voice is raised by the Sojourners’ community and finds expression in the writings of Jim Wallis. In a critique of cultural Christianity, Wallis argues that the Church of Christendom is fundamentally flawed because of its alliances with the media and with structures of political power.<sup>15</sup> This produces an evangelical nationalism that simply perpetuates a theology of empire.<sup>16</sup> Because this Church has accepted the big issues of empire it takes a stand at all the wrong places. This produces a powerless Church that “saves” people without transforming society.<sup>17</sup>

This, Wallis says, is the betrayal of Christianity. In Christendom:  
... the reversal is so complete, the blindness is so total, that today

*wealthy and powerful interests actually use evangelism to focus people's attention on their personal sins and to distract their attention from the reality of exploitation and oppression.*<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, Jacques Ellul, the third prophetic voice, argues that Christianity has been completely subverted by the state and the powers.<sup>19</sup> The triumphal Church of Christianity, that baptised society and made all its members Christians, becomes the polar opposite of the core of Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> For Christianity, as it is revealed in the New Testament, cannot win millions of converts nor can it bring in millions of dollars of revenue.<sup>21</sup> Because Christianity must exist in conflict with society and the state, the Church tends to become weary of the tension. Therefore, "subversion takes place, not because society is wicked, but because revelation is intolerable."<sup>22</sup> Yet, because people in Christendom do not want to seem to reject Christianity, it is perverted and subverted.<sup>23</sup> Within this subverted Christianity forces of the state, of money, of power, of deception, of accusation, of division, and of destruction come to reign.<sup>24</sup> Yet these powers cannot have become sovereign because of the workings of the Holy Spirit. The success of the powers within Christendom, their

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In light of the fall of Christendom it is especially important to hear these voices lest the Church simply pursue a return to Christendom.

Instead of returning to Christendom the missional Church must return to a more genuine understanding of its faith, one that heeds prophetic voices and is wary of alliances with socio-political powers. As Rahner says, "we ought to be surprised how

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seldom the Church comes into conflict with those who hold power. This ought to make us deeply suspicious of ourselves."<sup>26</sup>

#### ***The role of narratives: discarding absolutes***

As the West continues to move away from Christendom, the Church cannot hope to appeal to metaphysical or moral absolutes to support its proclamation as it engages with society. Within a pluralistic society such givens simply do not exist. This is so because the Christian story no longer functions as a societal metanarrative. Christians cannot simply recommend a Christian ethic to those outside of the Christian story for there is no universal moral code.<sup>27</sup> Notions like "love," "peace," and "justice" are not givens but derive their meaning and intelligibility from a narrative construal.<sup>28</sup> In this regard it is important to understand that all human life is grounded in stories. Stories are not substitutes for facts or abstract truths; rather they are the framework for understanding the world and cannot be reduced to maxims.<sup>29</sup> The morally chaotic state of the western world reflects a society that seems to have lost any

form of structuring narrative. Such a society exists only with "the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived."<sup>30</sup> The erosion of symbols and meaningful language coupled with the focus upon the eternal now and the devaluation of tradition and history has resulted in a loss of narrative.<sup>31</sup> Each person embraces a narrative of their own choosing, or embraces a lifestyle defined by crises that has no time to realise, or dwell upon the fact, that a structuring narrative is missing. The Church can no longer appeal to any absolutes within the thinking, feeling, and action of the pluralistic contemporary society.<sup>32</sup>

#### ***The return to Babel***

The decreasing influence (and size) of the Church has caused many to attempt to repackage the Christian message in a way that is more comprehensible and appealing to contemporary audiences. Seeker-sensitive churches abound, and the gospel is repackaged in the language of post-modernity. However, such strategies, while creating church growth in some places, have been

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largely ineffective at creating any significant transformation. This is so for two reasons. First, as suggested above, many of those seeking to re-evangelise the West have not recognised how deeply involved the Church remains within the structures of power. Secondly, very few missional strategists have

considered the role that *language* plays. The belief that changing the words can simply repackage the message is one that needs to be re-examined, especially in light of the contemporary situation.

Shifts within western culture have resulted in a situation where words are now understood as strictly *formal*. Words no longer have meaningful content but can be used to designate anything whatsoever.<sup>33</sup> western society is currently experiencing the “death of the word.”<sup>34</sup> Increasingly language only works in the realm of the commonplace. It is useful for activities like ordering food or planning a date but it is increasingly inadequate for anything beyond that. This death of the word is exhibited in and perpetuated by three areas: political doublespeak, the marketing of the sacred and symbolic, and the shift from a typographic to a visual culture.

Noam Chomsky, a linguistics professor at M.I.T., has gained notoriety by revealing the doublespeak of American politicians and media organisations. Chomsky shows, in careful case by case studies, how acts of aggression and terror, are routinely described as “the defence of democracy and human rights.”<sup>35</sup> Thus enemies of American corporate enterprises are “terrorists,” “communists,” or even “opponents of civilisation,” while the phrase “U.S. terrorism” is an oxymoron like “thunderous silence,” or “American aggression.”<sup>36</sup> Within this realm of content free language the current President of the United States can say, “I just want you to know that, when we talk about war, we’re really talking about peace.”<sup>37</sup> Such statements go relatively unquestioned, revealing the way politics treats language and words as forms that can be filled with whatever content they desire.<sup>38</sup> Although the general population may be little aware of how deeply western liberal democracy is attached to private capitalistic endeavours, they have adopted a general attitude that politicians cannot be trusted. People may not be sure *how* they are being lied to but

they are sure that they are being lied to. Meaningful political language has been lost in a glut of grandiloquence and a proliferation of glorified words.<sup>39</sup>

Consumerism and current marketing campaigns have also resulted in the devaluation of language, especially regarding the sacred and the symbolic. Religious and ideological language is adopted by commercial enterprise. Thus, Sumner Redstone’s assertion that “MTV is associated with the forces of freedom and democracy around the world” does not strike the public as exceedingly questionable.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, marketing campaigns are most effective when they are irrational, exploiting the magical and poetical powers of language and symbols.<sup>41</sup> Corporate branding

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sells merchandise that becomes a “lifestyle philosophy.” Products are no longer commodities but concepts.<sup>42</sup> Language and symbols are applied indiscriminately, a golf-club becomes representative of forgiveness, a piece of furniture represents democracy, and the symbols of all other gods and drained of their sacred or serious connotations. Repetition and indiscriminate application turns language into meaningless sounds.<sup>43</sup> Consumerism, like the God of the Bible, asserts, “You shall have no other gods before me.”<sup>44</sup>

Finally the shift from a typographic culture to a visual culture is an expression of the devaluation of language, and itself a contribution to the death of the word. The form a conversation takes

will have a powerful influence on what ideas can be expressed.<sup>45</sup> The media-metaphor shift from a typographic to a visual culture has reduced much language to complete nonsense.<sup>46</sup> As Neil Postman says, “One picture may be worth a thousand words but a thousand pictures, especially of the same thing, may not be worth anything.”<sup>47</sup> This is exactly what the assembly of Vatican II warned the Church about. Before one embraces the media one must understand the way in which the media impacts the message.<sup>48</sup> A reliance on images destroys discourse for genuine discourse requires continuity. A visual culture, and especially a consumer culture, devalues continuity in favour of the eternal now.<sup>49</sup>

Within a culture of doublespeak, of consumerism, and of images, language is increasingly whatever a person chooses to make it. In a culture without a history, without continuity, where words are applied indiscriminately to a variety of contexts, there can be no serious discourse. The western culture has returned to Babel.

It is this return to Babel that those who repackage the Christian message have failed to take seriously enough. By attempting to present the gospel in a manner that is comprehensible to culture, the contemporary Church risks repeating the mistakes made by the Church in modernity. Since the Enlightenment and the rise of the secular state Christians have sought to translate Christianity into terms that are meaningful and compelling to those who don’t share Christianity’s particularistic beliefs.<sup>50</sup> However, the more successful Christians were the more the particularities and the theological lost significance. What began as a tactical retreat too quickly became a rout.<sup>51</sup> Changes in language have been unable to stay true to the original message in its totality of meaning and so the gospel is inevitably distorted.<sup>52</sup> When contemporary western Christians attempt to present Christianity as a religion of “peace,” “love,” and “universal human rights” it is the



cultural definitions of those words that end up co-opting the uniquely Christian understanding. The result is ideas abstracted from the concrete person of Jesus and produces a philosophy that attempts to exist outside of history.<sup>53</sup> A Church that spreads by speaking the language of culture is, inevitably, a cultural church and not a Christian Church.

If doubts remain one would do well to examine how free-market capitalism and western liberal democracies have subverted contemporary counter-cultural movements. Voices of dissent are quickly co-opted and become the “next big thing”. Or they are absorbed. For example, many people in the West tend to believe that women have attained equal status with men. Such a belief contradicts the statistics that sexual assaults and acts of violence against women are actually increasing.<sup>54</sup> What begins as a radical voice from the margins is branded and marketed into a new fad. This is even true of movements that oppose the very roots of capitalism. Shortly after the birth of the anti-corporate movement corporate marketing absorbed the signs and symbols of anti-corporate action.<sup>55</sup> Thus feminism and girl power are pimped out by the music and fashion industries, the GAP stencils graffiti slogans like, “Revolution!” on its store windows, and Benetton equates buying their clothing with fighting racism. In the same way the Church that seeks to exist as a counter-culture yet chooses to speak the language of culture will become absorbed and marketed.

### **Finding a way forward**

#### ***Keeping the Christian proclamation Christian***

All of this leads to what Jurgen Motmann calls an identity-involvement dilemma.<sup>56</sup> The contemporary Church is faced with a crisis of identity and a crisis of relevance. The more it attempts to embrace a uniquely Christian identity, the less relevant it becomes. The more it attempts to be relevant, the more it loses its uniquely Christian identity. One leads to decay through uncritical

assimilation, the other leads to decay through sectarian withdrawal.<sup>57</sup>

In seeking to resolve this dilemma this paper proposes that the Church refuse to compromise or adulterate the gospel. In the midst of Babel the Church must continue to proclaim a uniquely Christian

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message. Christian convictions must be expressed in a Christian language.<sup>58</sup> However, the Church must also indwell the Christian story. It is the indwelling and embodiment of the Christian story that makes it comprehensible (and perhaps even appealing) to society. It is the actions of the Christian community that exegete the Christian message. To say that Christians believe in God is “true but uninteresting” until the

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community takes a certain shape to reveal the character of the Christian God.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the Church must continue to speak the language of Christianity. By rooting itself in biblical history and Christian tradition it is able to engage in a genuine dialogue and continue the Christian story, for Christianity is

not a set of dogmas but a story waiting to be finished.<sup>60</sup>

It is stories that are particularly good at subverting or modifying other stories. As Tom Wright says, “tell someone to do something and you change their life for a day; tell someone a story and you change their life.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, speaking the Christian language, and embodying the Christian story should be the Church’s response to the contemporary situation. By being a story-telling body it will win freedom from the swirl of stories in society.<sup>62</sup> The Hebrew prophets, from Moses through to Jesus, understood the unique power of language and stories. The culture of Babel seeks to destroy language for it too understands that social realities can be made new by the power of the word.<sup>63</sup> By speaking the Word that is Christ, and embodying the Word by living in Christ, the Church moves beyond reforming Babel and begins to dismantle it altogether. For this reason the Church that lives prophetically is “intensely concerned with matters linguistic and epistemological.”<sup>64</sup>

There are four elements of this Christian language and lifestyle that deserve to be examined in greater detail. This first is the person of Jesus. Knowing the Jesus-story must be the first step to anything that is genuinely Christian. The second is the uniquely Christian understanding of God that is revealed in Trinitarian theology. The third is the heart of missional Christianity found in the Kingdom of God and the fourth is the announcement of the forgiveness of sins. This fourfold proclamation presents those particularly Christian and theological elements that are quickly abandoned when the Church attempts to speak the language of culture and places them in the positions of centrality – where they belong.

#### ***Proclaiming Jesus: authoritative story and story-teller***

If Christians are to rediscover their unique identity and speak a language that has the ability to transform Babel they must be rooted

in what Mortimer Arias calls “the subversive memory of Jesus.”<sup>65</sup> Jesus is the heart of the Christian faith and so the Jesus-story must be at the heart of the Christian proclamation. Jesus was the culmination of the prophetic tradition and was a master of using language in new ways. He was a master of telling stories and the Church must look to the example that he sets.

Jesus was constantly telling the story of Israel, he was reminding the people of God of their history, and by remembering that history he was empowering people to participate in their history.<sup>66</sup> He retold the story of Israel in order to break open the worldviews of his hearers and remould them around himself.<sup>67</sup> Jesus had little interest in expressing eternal truths but told subversive stories that required immediate action.<sup>68</sup> Yet, although Jesus used language that would have been familiar to his audiences, he gave the words new meanings. Jesus spoke of the forgiveness of sins, of the coming of the kingdom of God and the return of YHWH to Zion, yet he proclaimed that those events were occurring in unexpected ways. He told “strangely familiar stories but meant the wrong thing by them.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, he took the central symbols of Jewish identity (land, family, Torah, and Temple) and radically reworked them.<sup>70</sup>

Because of this, Jesus’ stories and parables, can only be understood in light of the way in which he lived. Apart from his actions Jesus’ message is incomprehensible and seems like nonsense. Jesus accepted the disciples’ affirmation of his Messiahship, but he then immediately speaks of suffering and reveals a new way of being Messiah. Jesus says the kingdom of God has come, but reveals that it has come to the poor and the outcasts. It is the healings and the acts of table fellowship that interpret what Jesus means when he talks about the radical welcome of the kingdom.<sup>71</sup> It is the deeds of Jesus that confirm and signify the reality of his words.<sup>72</sup> Jesus’ whole existence is merged with his proclamation; his teachings cannot be separated from his

actions.<sup>73</sup>

By telling subversive stories and announcing the forgiveness of sins Jesus inevitably draws the wrath of the religious and state authorities onto himself. They are aware that his proclamation and living, if allowed to continue, will not simply reform the system, but call the entire system into question. Jesus not only calls into question those who control morality, he challenges the political-economic realities that lay behind the morality.<sup>74</sup> Jesus’ message essentially abolished everything that justified political and economic inequities.<sup>75</sup> It is no wonder he spoke in parables and travelled often. If he had spoken clearly and stayed within Jerusalem he would have

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been killed long before he was able to form a community around himself.<sup>76</sup>

If the Church is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus it must be firmly rooted in the gospel stories and the broader story of God’s interactions with his people and with the world. The Church must proclaim God’s story. It must remember where it has come from if it is to know its unique identity. This means that Christians who are parts of churches committed to Christendom or Babel must learn to tell the Christian story in a way that subverts the people of God first and foremost.<sup>77</sup> Just as Jesus assailed

the Jewish identity marks of Sabbath, food laws, circumcision, and tithing so also contemporary Christians who follow Jesus must learn to attack the badges of identity that define the western churches. In a world where the market has co-opted the symbols of Christianity the Church must discover ways to recapture the power of its images. Tony Campolo has been one example of a voice that has attempted to do this. In an oft-repeated speech Campolo speaks about poverty and then grieves the fact that “Christians just don’t give a shit.” He then goes on to explain that the thing that truly upsets him is the fact that most Christians are more angered by the fact that he said “shit” than by everything he said about poverty. Campolo has subverted one of the current badges of Christian identity (not swearing) and called the western churches back to an understanding of faith rooted in the gospel. The Church must tell the story of Jesus and embody the story of Jesus if it hopes to engage missionally with the world. It must remember the story of Jesus so that it is once again empowered to live within it.

#### ***Proclaiming the Trinity: community and suffering***

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the particularistic elements of the historical Christian faith that is quickly abandoned for a more palatable proclamation of God. Instead of proclaiming a triune God the oneness of God is often emphasised in order to make God more comprehensible and, therefore, more acceptable to secular society. However, the doctrine of the Trinity is unique to Christianity and should merit special attention. As Moltmann says:

*The rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity begins when the oneness of a merely pragmatic thinking is overcome, and when practice is liberated from activism, so that it can become a liberated practice of the gospel.<sup>78</sup>*

When the misguided (and essentially ineffective) pragmatism of those who attempt to translate the

nature of God into the language of Babel is overcome two essential elements of Christianity come to the fore.

The first element is the element of community. The triune God exists as community.<sup>79</sup> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a relationship of equality, mutual indwelling, and self-giving love. When God is understood as three-in-one then the Church must also be defined as a community of equality and self-giving love. While monotheism makes God's power absolute, Trinitarian theology makes God's love absolute.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the Church that proclaims the Trinity will be a Church that criticises structures of power that are based upon the idea of God's oneness. The Trinity confronts political monotheism (one God, therefore one emperor) and clerical monotheism (one God, therefore one pope, or bishop, or pastor).<sup>81</sup> The message of the Trinity will become

comprehensible to society when the Church exists as a community of equals who love one another selflessly.

The second element revealed by the Trinity is the element of suffering. It is the doctrine of the Trinity that begins to make sense of what happened on the cross. The recognition of Jesus' divinity caused the early Christians to not only re-examine the nature of God but also the relationship between God and suffering. For, as Moltmann says, "To comprehend God in the crucified Jesus, abandoned by God,

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requires a 'revolution in the concept of God.'"<sup>82</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity reveals a God who suffers with his creation and for his creation.<sup>83</sup> God is revealed as a God of *pathos* not *apatheia*.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, the Church that is in Christ participates in the Trinity.<sup>85</sup> This means that the Church proclaims the Trinity by moving into active suffering and by experiencing the suffering of passionate love. This is why the cross becomes the test of everything that deserves to be called Christian.<sup>86</sup> The Church reveals the God of suffering love by standing in

solidarity with those who are crucified in contemporary society. The world comes to understand the nature of the Christian God when the people of God embrace the grief, enter into the death, and know the pain of the marginalised. The world comes to recognise the crucified God through a Church that speaks (and groans) from the margins.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Proclaiming the kingdom of God: Jesus is Lord!***

The proclamation of God's kingdom was at the heart of Jesus' message and ministry. Likewise, it should be central to the proclamation and nature of the contemporary Church. "To proclaim the gospel of the dawning kingdom is the first and most important element in the mission of Jesus, the mission of the Spirit and the mission of the church."<sup>88</sup> Much of the Christian theology that has been highly influential upon the western Church has neglected the centrality

of the kingdom message. This has often been the result of reading Paul's letters in a way that dehistoricises them and separates them from the gospel of Jesus. When properly understood Paul's language, although different than the language of Jesus, is rooted firmly within, and makes no sense outside of, the perspective of the kingdom.<sup>89</sup> Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, and Paul proclaims Jesus. This is so because *Jesus himself is the king*. The Church that proclaims the kingdom of God will be a Church that proclaims the Lordship of



Jesus.<sup>90</sup> Paul, along with the rest of the New Testament, emphatically asserts that Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord.

However, the Church's proclamation of Jesus' Lordship will only make sense when the Church refuses to recognise any other lords. That means that the Lordship of Jesus will be revealed to the world when Christians detach themselves from the idols of consumerism, from the idols of culture, and from the idols of western liberal democracies. The Church follows Jesus, not the leaders of the nation state. The Church worships Jesus not the idols of capitalism. The Church proclaims Jesus' Lordship by abandoning cultural models of security and

the earth since it belongs not to humanity but to Jesus.<sup>93</sup>

***Proclaiming the forgiveness of sins***  
Too often the contemporary Church, instead of announcing forgiveness, has proclaimed a message of judgement and damnation. The irony in this is that, by engaging in this proclamation and abandoning the Christian call to proclaim forgiveness, the Church itself experiences God's wrath and judgement. The western Church has announced judgement and by doing so it has come under God's judgement.

Yet, all these proclamations, the proclamation of the gospel story, of the Trinity, and of the Kingdom of

this. By announcing the forgiveness of sins the Church moves into the suffering of the world, taking on the sins of the world in order to bear them away.<sup>95</sup> It is this refusal to cease suffering that is at the heart of Christian forgiveness.<sup>96</sup>

Ultimately it is this proclamation of the forgiveness of sins that will not allow the Church to be subverted by outside forces. The openness to suffering, the community of radical love, and the person and Lordship of Jesus are all revealed in this proclamation. For this reason the Church that proclaims the forgiveness of sins will face persecution. It is this proclamation that will always be unpalatable to all other powers who will, therefore, seek to corrupt or abolish it. How true this Church is to this announcement is a litmus test of how true the Church remains to its own language and story.

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#### ***Christian eschatology and the end of history***

By proclaiming and living within the subversive memory of the gospel of Jesus, by revealing the triune nature of the suffering God, by witnessing to the kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus, and by announcing the forgiveness of sins the Church voices an emphatic *No* to Fukuyama's declaration that history has ended with the victory of free-market capitalism and western liberal democracies. This fourfold proclamation is rooted in a Christian eschatology that declares that it was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that signalled the end of history. History did not end after the fall of the Soviet Union. History ended two thousand years ago when a small group of women visited the tomb of a fallen revolutionary and found it empty. It was an angelic voice, not a voice from the U.S. State Department, that announced the end of history. It was an angel who said, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen."<sup>97</sup> History ended when God raised Jesus from the dead and revealed him as the Lord of history. Therefore,

living in faith. The Church proclaims Jesus' Lordship by giving instead of hoarding. The Church proclaims Jesus' Lordship by refusing to perpetuate the cycles of sin and death, by breaking cycles of poverty, of force, of alienation, and of godforsakenness.<sup>91</sup> Because Jesus, and only Jesus, is Lord the Church lives in an open relationality defined by giving, peace-making, brotherhood and sisterhood, and intimacy.

Similarly, because Jesus is proclaimed as Lord of *all*, as Lord of the *cosmos*, the Christian proclamation of Jesus' Lordship must take seriously the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Environmental and ecological concerns are therefore intimately linked to the gospel of the kingdom.<sup>92</sup> The proclamation of the kingdom breaks cycles of pollution that treat the earth as the property of humanity and causes Christians to live in a symbiotic relationship with

God, come to their fullest expression in the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. The declaration that, "your sins are forgiven" makes little sense in our contemporary situation. Sin and forgiveness are both foreign concepts. However, now more than ever, the Church is called to proclaim the forgiveness of sins. It is the forgiveness of sins that reveals the kingdom, that reveals exile is over, that reveals that God in Jesus Christ and his Spirit, has come near to us. The Church reveals the meaning of this proclamation by living as a forgiving and a forgiven community. Here, as with all the other proclamations, it is the existence of a Church that lives and believes this proclamation that acts as the *only* hermeneutic of what is proclaimed.<sup>94</sup> This proclamation is essentially anti-pragmatic. The Church of missional strategies focussed upon growth, and social strategies focussed upon the eradication of all suffering misses



the Church is the body of people who live after the true end of history. After the end of history the Church declares and embodies the new creation of all things. Jesus is the true end of history and the proclamation and life of the Church is the true clue to history.<sup>98</sup> It is this foreign element of Christianity that people like Fukuyama cannot understand. As he says:

*Men have proven themselves able to endure the most extreme material hardships in the name of ideas that exist in the realm of the spirit alone, be it the divinity of cows or the nature of the Holy Trinity.<sup>99</sup>*

When the western Church once again returns to *physically embodying* this fourfold proclamation the power of free-market capitalism and western liberal democracies will be revealed as a flash in the pan, not a monolithic force able to bring history to its end. Therefore, the Church will continue to love, to suffer, to forgive, to proclaim, and to confront the powers in the midst of Babel until the return of its Lord – who will bring the true *telos* and consummation to all of creation and all of history.

## Conclusion: the Holy Spirit and the Word

***“History ended when God raised Jesus from the dead and revealed him as the Lord of History. Therefore, the Church is the body of people who live after the true end of history.”***

The missional approach outlined here is one that requires a reliance upon the Holy Spirit that makes many western Christians uncomfortable. Instead of attempting to proclaim the Christian gospel in a way that is more comprehensible to those who live in

Babel (how possible is any genuine comprehension in the midst of Babel?), this paper counsels the Church to continue speaking its own unique language. It is the actions of the Church that will exegete its proclamation. However, it is the Holy Spirit that ultimately interprets the Christian message to the world. It is the in-breaking Spirit that grants comprehension. Thus, Rahner says, “Only when the message of the living God is preached in the churches *with the power of the Spirit*, will the impression disappear that the Church is merely an odd relic from the age of a society doomed to decline.”<sup>100</sup>

It is the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that makes the Gospel message comprehensible to the audience gathered in Jerusalem. It is

***“... the Church voices an emphatic No to Fukuyama’s declaration that history has ended with the victory of free-market capitalism and western liberal democracies.”***

through the empowerment of the Spirit that the Apostles are able to communicate to Hebrews, Greeks, Egyptians, and many others. The contemporary Church has attempted, through a western pragmatism, to do what only the Spirit can do. It has sought to translate the Gospel into the language of Babel instead of relying on the Spirit to make the message comprehensible. It is the Church, with the power of the Holy Spirit which “speaks all tongues, which lovingly understands and accepts all tongues, and thus overcomes the divisiveness of Babel.”<sup>101</sup>

The speaking of the Word of God is a revelation of God and therefore transcends human understanding and cannot be supported by human analogies.<sup>102</sup> Yet the Word, indwelt

by the Spirit, is God’s power for salvation. It is living and active. It is the pure Word of God that transforms the listeners, creating comprehension within them. When the Word is transformed to aid in that comprehension it loses its creative power and the listener remains trapped in Babel. Renouncing our own attempts to translate the Word is exactly the prerequisite that is required to proclaim the Word that truly redeems.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, if the Church hopes to engage missionally with the world it must speak Christianly, live Christianly, and rely on the living and active Christian God to make all things new.

## Endnotes

1. Cf. Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church*

*to Come*, Trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1974).

2. Rahner, 23-25.

3. Rahner, 22.

4. Rahner, 108. Thus, in a work highly influenced by Rahner, Charles Ringma writes, that we can, indeed we must, change the Church. It is our responsibility. God will maintain the essence of the Church, the people of God must make sure the structures of the Church reflect God’s heart (*Catch the Wind: The Shape of the Church to Come – And Our Place In It* [Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1994], 69-82).

5. Cf. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon: 1989).

6. Hauerwas and Willimon, 15.

7. Hauerwas and Willimon, 17.

8. Hauerwas and Willimon, 18.



9. Cf. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3-18. The article is available online at <http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm> [Accessed 6 December 2005].

10. On the impotence of organised religion Fukuyama says, "Modern liberalism itself was historically a consequence of the weakness of religiously-based societies which, failing to agree on the nature of the good life, could not provide even the minimal conditions of peace and stability." (<http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm>.)

11. For a critique of Christendom and "New Christendom" cf. William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 151-202; Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: the refusal to cease suffering, Radical Orthodoxy Series* (London: Routledge, 2001), 42-84.

12. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda & John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), 65-66.

13. Gutierrez, 203.

14. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson & John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 9. Moltmann writes this from a European context, where he himself was deeply influenced by his experiences in a British concentration camp in WWII.

15. Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for these Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 21.

16. Wallis, 21-26.

17. Wallis, 19, 24-25, 34.

18. Wallis, 36.

19. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

20. Within *The Subversion of Christianity* Ellul consistently refers to the core of Christianity as the "X" or the "X" of Christianity.

21. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 154.

22. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 158.

23. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 172.

24. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 174-86.

25. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 190.

26. Rahner, 62.

27. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 63.

28. Hauerwas, 117.

29. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God Volume One* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 38-39.

30. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 2. To a certain extent this has changed in the United States after September 11, 2001. The language of good, evil, salvation, and election has re-emerged. Cf. Naomi Klein, "The Terrifying Return of Great Men," in *Fences and Windows*:

Edward S. Herman; and, more recently, "Terrorism and Justice: Some Useful Truisms," in *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003), 187-216.

36. Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*, 113-14.

37. From a speech given June 18, 2002; <http://www.dubyaspeak.com/war2002.shtml> [Accessed 5 December 2005].

38. A local example of this is the passage of the "Safe Streets" Act within Vancouver. This Act was implemented a few years ago



*Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Globalisation Debate* (Toronto: Random House, 2002), 180-83.

31. Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Random House, 1992), 171.

32. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 11.

33. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkins (New York: Seabury, 1977), 29.

34. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 29.

35. Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 106. Two other works by Chomsky that address this issue are *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, Pantheon, 1988) co-authored with

in Toronto and was transposed to Vancouver this year. The "Safe Streets" Act does little in terms of making streets safe but does a lot in terms of removing the poor from public spaces.

39. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 30-32.

40. Sumner Redstone is the CEO of Viacom, which owns MTV. Quoted by Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Random House, 2000), 129.

41. Postman, *Technopoly*, 169.

42. Klein, *No Logo*, 16-21.

43. Postman, *Technopoly*, 170.

44. Postman, *Technopoly*, 169.

45. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to*



- Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 6.
46. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 16.
47. Postman, *Technopoly*, 166.
48. "Inter Mirifica" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. Trans. The Very Rev. Msgr. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 321-24.
49. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 32-33; Postman, *Amusing*, 99-113.
50. Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (New York: Seabury, 1985), 24.
51. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3.
52. Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelisation and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 1984), 64-66.
53. Hauerwas and Willimon, 21; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 23.
54. Jane Doe, *The Story of Jane Doe: A Book About Rape* (Toronto: Random House, 2003), 302-14, 359-60. Statistics reveal that a Canadian woman is raped every seventeen minutes, and one in three women in Canada has been sexually assaulted.
55. Naomi Klein, "From Symbols to Substance" in *Fences and Windows*, 236.
56. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 7.
57. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 21.
58. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 30.
59. Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," 42.
60. Newbigin, 12.
61. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40.
62. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. Trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 225.
63. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 9.
64. Brueggemann, 28.
65. Arias, 67.
66. Brueggemann, 22.
67. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 77.
68. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God Volume Two* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 173-74.
69. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 179.
70. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 428-37.
71. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 191-92.
72. "Dei Verbum" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, 112. Cf. Newbigin, 132: "The preaching is meaningless without the healings. They are the true explanation of what is happening, but if nothing is happening no explanation is called for and the words are empty words."
73. Brueggemann, 102; Moltman, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 81.
74. Brueggemann, 83-84.
75. Brueggemann, 102.
76. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 179-80.
77. This is exactly what Hauerwas and Willimon attempt to do in *Resident Aliens* when they argue that calling the Church back to being the Church is the means by which the world is transformed. Cf. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 99-102.
78. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. Trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 9.
79. As Darrell Johnson likes to say, "At the centre of the universe is a relationship." (*Experiencing the Trinity* [Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002], 37.)
80. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 197.
81. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 195. To this one could also add patriarchal monotheism that affirms that maleness of the one God and thereby makes all that is feminine subservient. The doctrine of the Trinity results in an egalitarian Church.
82. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 152.
83. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 4.
84. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 21.
85. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 9; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 277.
86. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 7.
87. Brueggemann, 95.
88. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.
89. Arias, 65.
90. As Tom Wright argues, the gospel of the kingdom is the proclamation that, "Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord." *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Saul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 46.
91. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 329-32.
92. Howard T. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom: Gospel, Culture and Mission in Biblical and Historical Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 133, 136-40.
93. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 333.
94. Newbigin, 227.
95. N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 47-51; Bell Jr., 193.
96. Bell Jr., 190.
97. Lk 24.5b-6a, *New American Standard Bible*.
98. Newbigin, 128.
99. Fukuyama.
100. Rahner, 87. Emphasis added.
101. "Ad Gentes" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, 558.
102. "Dei Verbum" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, 114; Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 208, 222.
103. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Trans. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1949), 98.



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