

## Section G - Church and Kingdom

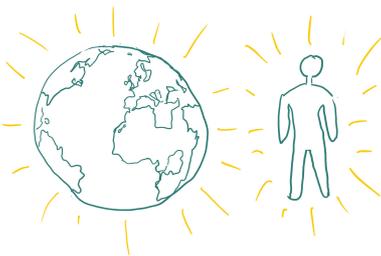
*Church and Kingdom* is a longer piece by Stephen Platten reflecting on how this strand of evangelism has developed in relation to the ecclesiology of the Church of England, including its outworking in an ex-mining community in West Yorkshire.

### G1 Church and Kingdom

**Stephen Platten**

What is the point of mission? There is undoubtedly a real divergence in the way this question is answered, which is perhaps most clearly seen in contrasts between certain expressions of ‘evangelical theology’ and theological reflection emerging from ‘catholic’ expressions of the Christian faith. It is often described by making a relatively sharp distinction between Church and Kingdom, which we shall encounter a little further on, and which concerns what the Church is and what it understands itself to be for.

This divergence was captured classically in an article in the journal ‘Theology’, back in 1979. The article was by Paul Gibson, a Canadian Anglican theologian and was titled *A Partisan Plea for Liberal Mission*. We shall not try to précis the piece here, but instead simply describe the aim of the article. Paul’s key point is that *liberal* and *liberality* imply an essential freedom to choose. Surely a liberal theologian would not want to press anyone or indeed proselytise anyone since surely that stands in absolute contradiction to the very word liberal. But the irony, at the same time, is, of course, that the liberal Christian would hope that as many others as possible might also be attracted to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, clothed in the same liberal garments that she herself displays. Now that may feel to be something of a caricature, but it is not far from the essence of the ‘partisan plea’ for which Gibson argues.



The divergence implied here often focuses on whether the Christian faith requires each individual to give his his/her life to Christ or whether it is about the cosmic transformation of our humanity. But the disagreement is not simply about individual versus corporate salvation, although that is part of the story. This bifurcation between the individual and the full mass of humanity is itself an over-simplistic and distorted view of the nature of the

Christian message. Instead, the two things seen together are very clearly reflected as far back as in the theology of St Paul. So, for example, in Romans 7, Paul sharply defines that battle which goes on in each individual’s soul:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... who would deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

G1

Here Paul directly acknowledges the individual challenge and the promise of 'justification' or 'right-wising' as Rudolf Bultmann put it in rather ugly terms. Individuals are challenged to respond to Christ. But Paul also sees the crucial significance of the corporate or universal aspect of what God has done for humanity in Christ. It is perhaps most richly stated in the much-quoted words from the fifth chapter of the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation."

A similar message emerges in the first chapter of the Letter to the Colossians, whether we believe it to have been written by Paul or by a very close disciple. Here we are challenged by the entire 'Christ Event', or what Bultmann, in equally ugly words to those I quoted earlier, described as the 'salvation occurrence'. This was an event of cosmic, universal proportions; it was nothing less than a transformation of our humanity into the nature of Christ himself.

But thus far, in all that has been said, there has been no reference to *Church* or *Kingdom*. Where do we find it in Holy Scripture? Of course, in the later New Testament writings, some notion of the Church, *ecclesia*, that is a gathered community, does emerge, and certainly in the gospels, Kingdom is an essential concept, although it is not immediately translatable into a 'kingdom theology' such as that term is so often used in Christian social ethics. Nonetheless, without doubt the concept of *reconciliation* is central in both Testaments. This in itself implies an imperative issuing from the gospel.

This brings us to the work of a key theologian who speaks to this whole debate, namely one Frederick Denison Maurice, an Anglican writing in the nineteenth century and one of the founders of a proto-Christian socialism. Maurice was ever the controversialist. Son of a Unitarian minister, he became an Anglican and initially embraced the teaching of the 'Oxford Movement'. Later he rebelled against Tractarianism to some extent. He taught in a number of institutions, eventually becoming Professor of English Literature and History and then Theology at King's College, London. Later he was stripped of his Chair – partly on account of his Christian Socialism, but perhaps more importantly because of the impact of his writing in both *The Kingdom of Christ* and in his *Theological Essays*, which were both seen as falling short of orthodoxy. Almost certainly, too, misunderstanding arose from his writing style, which is extraordinarily convoluted and notable for its prolixity.

In terms of our focus here, perhaps most crucial of all was his writing on ecclesiology, that is, his understanding of the Church and sacraments. His teaching on baptism takes us to the heart. In a letter to a Quaker friend, he broaches the subject head on, rejecting what he sees as the claims of Evangelicals and then similarly offering a critique of Pusey and the Tractarians, whom indeed he misrepresents to a degree or perhaps simply misunderstands. Evangelical teaching is rejected because of its rootedness in the faith of the individual; what he believed to be the Anglo-Catholic approach is rejected because of its apparent insistence on baptism bringing about a change in the nature of our humanity. But what did Maurice himself believe? In this letter to his Quaker friend, he writes:

‘In my last letter I maintained that Christ, by whom, and for whom, all things were created, and in whom all things consist, has made reconciliation for mankind.’<sup>1</sup>



So, for Maurice, already established in Christ’s work is a relationship between every human being and God in Christ, right from that person’s birth onwards. In other words, we are born into a state of grace. Baptism pours further grace into that relationship as the person becomes part of the community of the Church. Such teaching dismisses the terror of infant children dying outside a state of grace having died before being baptised. Jeremy Morris summarises F D Maurice’s view thus:

“Baptism begins the believer’s life in the *Kingdom* and instantiates for the believer a union with God already true through the reconciling life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Baptism, for Maurice,

was egalitarian, in that it dispensed with the idea of all spiritual gradations between human beings. All human beings had a spiritual ‘eye’ which could be closed by self-will, or opened through baptismal fellowship.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, every individual effectively is welcomed into the Kingdom at birth but not sacramentally incorporated into the Church. Church and Kingdom are not the same – Kingdom is a broader concept and does not bring with it the sacramental elements of faith which are essential to any ecclesiology.

Elsewhere Jeremy Morris writes:

“It was a fundamental axiom of Maurice that God had created human beings for communion with each other and with himself. This relationship constituted the primary truth of theology under which all other doctrines stood.”<sup>3</sup>

Having, then, set out Maurice’s approach, this offers a foundation for our understanding of the sharp division of opinion on personal and corporate salvation, which we encountered earlier. Maurice argues that God’s love is there for us from our birth, God is already working for the Kingdom, going before us; we do not establish the Kingdom for God. We are offered the choice of working with God for the Kingdom into which we are joined in baptism.

How might this affect our view of the Church? Let us bring on the next witness in the person of the German Protestant theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, who was writing in the early years of the twentieth century. Troeltsch’s work straddled the boundaries between theology and sociology. Here we shall focus only on his understanding of sociological models of the Church and the implications of these for ecclesiology. Troeltsch saw two main divergent models which he believed described different understandings of the Church – he calls these the *communal* and *associational* models. The communal pattern assumes, after the mould of F D Maurice, that all human beings are, from the beginning, created in and for God’s grace – we are all born into a relationship with God in Christ. Thus, the communal model assumes both that God is already in the world working to establish the Kingdom, and that therefore every human being is the responsibility of, and

lies within the focus of, the Church's apostleship and ministry. Of course, individuals may deliberately exclude themselves from the Church's purview either by 'closing their spiritual eyes by their own self-will' (to use Maurice's phrase) to the path of faith, or by being adherents of a different creed or faith community. This inclusive approach has been very much the pattern followed by the Church of England since the Reformation.

The *associational* view of the Church is rooted in differing models of a gathered community, of an eclectic church. Here, in its most extreme form, the church sees its role as the agency that snatches individuals as brands from the burning fires of hell or brings them safely into the ark of the faithful and thus into a 'personal relationship with Jesus'. As the impact of secularisation has increased, so has the attractiveness of this second model correspondingly increased. The implied 'liberalism' of the communal model is seen to be too complacent, insufficiently proactive in terms of the salvation of individual souls. Effectively it was this associational model that governed the drafters of the Church of England report *Mission-Shaped Church*. Undoubtedly, when well organised, churches founded on this model can be highly 'successful', albeit exclusive in approach and unashamedly understanding themselves as a gathered church. Baptism is the one and only gateway to salvation.

Each of these models will perforce beget a different pattern of mission. The associational modus operandi will focus primarily on increasing the numbers in the pews – that is the aim and effectively the starting point: mission means more people. Other implications will follow but this is the primary focus, alongside the nourishing of the internal life of the community. Such an approach most often uses the phrase *being church* – it is crucial to note the omission of the definite article there. Through that omission, 'church' becomes an end in itself. It produces an inner-directed pattern where all the rigmarole of church (too often seen as a club for those of a like mind) consumes the life of the community. The aim was outreach but effectively the result is 'in-reach'. In a moment we shall see the impact of retaining the definite article and speaking of 'the church', or better still 'the *Church*', by which one is identifying with the Church universal and not one self-contained local community.

The *communal* model sees mission through the lens of care and engagement with the whole community, working for the Kingdom – being *the Church* – now applies. Such a phrase requires a predicate; what are we being the Church for...? To leave the phrase 'the Church' hanging with no predicate is vacuous – the Church is called to be the instrument of God in Christ in the world, working with God to build the Kingdom. That is what the Church is for. Through care and witness to Christian values - sometimes requiring political action - and often challenging assumptions in the ambient culture – then, the Church, it is argued, will draw others to Christ. The curtains opened in the last generation, in terms of the Church of England, with an initiative set precisely within this perspective in the form of the report commissioned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, *Faith in the City*. It is a classic derivative of the communal approach which led to the establishment of the Church Urban Fund and provoked government to take action in the inner cities.

On my arrival in West and South Yorkshire as Bishop of Wakefield, similar challenges beckoned. Grimethorpe, the place where the film *Brassed Off* was set, is one of the most

powerful examples of the challenges which the local church, that is the diocese, had to face at that time. Grimethorpe had been a thriving community of some 13,000 souls. By the time of my arrival, twenty years after the divisive Miners' Strike, with deep mining now almost gone, Grimethorpe was down to just 7,000 inhabitants, with a decimated community spirit. Those who had work drove off daily to warehouses on the M62, but many were *workless* and not *unemployed* – by now there were some families who had been living through two generations with worklessness. The impact on the social psychology of that pit village was devastating. Here, then, was the first focus for the Church and its ministry and mission.

Its only immediate resources were the parish priest and a rather barn-like Victorian church building. Father Peter Needham was a charismatic character (using that word in its non churchy sense) and he immersed himself in the community. Early on I was invited to preach at Evensong and then carry the Blessed Sacrament through the entire village, finishing at the Working Mens' Club, the old miners' gathering place, where I gave benediction to a packed house. All along our route, people had crowded in the streets to be part of this spectacle, but more than that, this was a symbol of renewal. Alongside this we worked with local doctors, social services and community groups – most of them led by women. (Arthur Scargill's estranged wife was a GP and churchgoer – Scargill himself was by now 'persona non grata' in much of the former mining community of this part of South Yorkshire). We were able to assist in the process of drawing down grants for renewal and social support. Eventually the interior of the church building was adapted for other uses without interfering with the main worship space. Here was a communal church pattern exemplified. Here there was a clear sense of working for the Kingdom; the local church saw its role as seeking out God's presence and working with the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in the community. Interestingly enough, gradually the congregation grew, not exponentially but significantly, in what had before seemed a very Godless climate.

Alongside what I have described thus far, we all also owe much in this area to Roman Catholic social teaching, reaching back for more than a century to Pope Leo XIII's ground-breaking encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Teaching issuing from the concept of the Common Good has been seminal and is rooted in a communal view of mission. Two other notable writers outside the Roman Catholic Church showing a similar communal focus include Reinhold Niebuhr in the USA, with his emphasis on Christian Realism, and with his challenging, seminal 1932 book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which indicated a radical difference in the behaviour of groups as opposed to individuals in relation to politics and social ethics. From the Anglican stable, perhaps the key contributor was William Temple, who was a member of the Beveridge Committee whose work presaged the emergence of the Welfare State and the 1944 Education Act. Temple's *Christianity and the Social Order* sowed the seeds for this development, and Temple and Niebuhr were reciprocally interdependent! Temple's concept of 'middle axioms' attempted to apply a Kingdom theology which allowed Christian values to be applied to the life of society as a whole – a thoroughly communal model.



Of late, another challenging model has emerged with the work of the American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas is trenchantly critical of 'liberal' models, including those of Niebuhr and Temple. He argues that engaging with the values of contemporary culture compromises the challenge of Christian theology and, indeed, Christology (ironically there is overlap with the very different starting point of John Milbank and the 'radical orthodox' school). Instead, Hauerwas argues, the Church must simply 'be the Church' and, if its life and witness has a challenging impact on society, then so be it, but the essence of the gospel can be the only starting point. Such an approach has different implications once again. Nonetheless, these two models need not be entirely confrontational or mutually exclusive, as has been demonstrated recently.<sup>4</sup>

As a Church of England deacon, priest and bishop, I admit to remaining entirely committed to the communal model of the Church and the patterns of mission that it implies. All people fall within the gracious love of God in Christ, all are part of the responsibility of God's Church – not, of course just the Church of England! Nonetheless, there is no doubt that an ideological application of this principle will have its own serious flaws. A concern for a growing Church with a healthy and growing kernel is essential if the gospel is to survive. We can learn from elements within the associational model and should not simply discount all concern with the salvation of individuals and their relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. New ways of attracting more to the Church community are essential, perhaps through pilgrimage and other initiatives, including street theatre, political engagement, performances of *The Way of the Cross*, etc. These may catch the Zeitgeist. There is no philosophy more illiberal than that of the fundamentalist liberal! We must remain open to learn from those with whom we most vehemently disagree!

1. *To Build Christ's Kingdom: F.D.Maurice and his Writings*. Edited by Jeremy Morris. Canterbury Press, London.2007.p.95. 2. Jeremy Morris, *F D Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.2005.p.82. 3. Op cit.p.64 4. Cf. for example Matthew Bullimore 'Public Theology or Ecclesial Theology', in *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology*. SCM Press, London.2017. pp.144-166.

### How you can take part in this work

1.
  1. Contributions  
We welcome additions to this resource, which will be available as a website which can include sound files.  
Please email your piece to [office@utusheffield.org.uk](mailto:office@utusheffield.org.uk) by 1 November for consideration by the Writing Group.
  2. Seminar/support group  
The Writing Group recognises that some ministers who come from this perspective can feel very isolated and/or frustrated that their understanding of what is Good News and how to share it is not valued by colleagues.  
We are looking to hold an online get-together to share ideas, encouragement and prayer, some of which might become items for the website if people want that, quarterly on Monday afternoons for 1 1/4 hour. Please check dates and book via [office@utusheffield.org.uk](mailto:office@utusheffield.org.uk) and help shape how this develops.

## Section H - Kingdom Evangelism Resources

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### Section A - Creative things

Faith Pictures - Church Army

Pictures of Jesus – Christian Aid

The of Andy Flanagan

Sheffield Resurrection Octyche: To borrow the Octyche for an exhibition in your church please contact in the first instance The Administrator, The Foundry at Victoria Hall, Norfolk Street, Sheffield S1 2 JB, 0114 272 1749, [admin@victoriahallsheffield.org](mailto:admin@victoriahallsheffield.org)

### Section B – Biblical sources and theological matters

The Lost Message of Paul. Steve Chalke (SPCK 2019)

Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England Hannah Rich (Theos 2020)

Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount, Richard Rohr (with J. Feister) (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996)

Miranda Threlfall-Holmes, How to eat Bread: 21 nourishing ways to read the Bible, 2021.

### Section C - understandings of evangelism

Journeying Out: A new approach to Christian Mission. Ann Morisy (Continuum 2006).

Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission. Ann Morisy (Continuum 2009)

Faith Beyond Doubt. Brian MacLaren

Liberal Evangelism. John Saxbee (SPCK 1994)

Going for Growth. Jeffrey John. (Affirming Catholicism).

Not Religion, But Love: Practising a Radical Spirituality of Compassion. David Andrews (Lion Publishing, 2001)

Pilgrim Course Book 8, Church and Kingdom. (Church House Publishing, 2015).

### Section D – praxis

HOPE Together - all sorts of resources based around the liturgical year, for connecting with your local community. [https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups318984HOPE\\_Together\\_in.aspx](https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups318984HOPE_Together_in.aspx)

Living His Story. Hannah Steele (SPCK 2020)

Hey, Be and See: We Can be the Change We Want to See in the World. David Andrews (Authentic Media, 2009)

Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps. Richard Rohr (Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2011).

The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation. Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell (Whitaker, 2016).

### Section E – discipling and faith-sharing tools

The Journey – following Jesus through Mark's Gospel. John Vincent (Ashram Press 2008, new edition due 2022).

Talking of God together

<https://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/TOG0118/talking-of-god-together>

Talking of God with others

<https://www.methodistpublishing.org.uk/books/TOG0219/talking-of-god-with-others>

SMART Course LYCIG – (Leading Your Church Into Growth) revised 2021  
She too – Bible Study, Bible Book Club

Luke 4:18-19.

