

Chapter 10

Paradigm Shifts

One of the difficulties that most of us have is that we know exactly where every other expression of church is wrong but are blind to where we ourselves are missing the mark. If the type of church we are connected to has taken time to examine the New Testament and look to structure ourselves in the light of what is expressed there (perhaps with a belief in elders, apostles and prophets) we can find that this compounds our difficulties. Why do I say that? Because whenever two items have a close resemblance it proves even harder to see the differences. Ever remember, as a child doing the little picture quizzes where there were two almost identical pictures with only a few differences and the challenge was to find all the differences? That can be what faces us when we look at our expression of church and then read the New Testament. We tend to read the text through our current experience of church and so when we read the biblical words we subconsciously substitute our style of church. Paul planted churches just like ours!

We all need a paradigm shift, or in simple language a new way of seeing things. As this takes place it will help us shape what we are in without being too critical of other expressions of church. As we explore some paradigm shifts below we will embark on a journey from one set of parameters to another, from one way of thinking to another.

Church paradigm shifts

The culture is demanding a change of shape in church. In saying that I know that there will be those who object saying that we have to be biblical in shape. My response is that if we are going to be biblical then we have to be shaped by the culture. In one sense it was the fallenness of humanity that called for a

change of shape in the Godhead – or more exactly God’s interactive love with his world brought about the Incarnation, for we read that, ‘For God so loved the world...’

If the church can recapture a love for the world then it is the church that will change shape more than the world will. Peter Ward uses the helpful phrase of Liquid Church,¹⁹ of a people that flow into the shape of the container they are filling. I cannot overstate the change that will take place in church experience in the Western world in these next few decades. It is not simply that we have people bored with church as we have it, nor that it is time to be experimental for experiments sake, but I believe it is because we are coming to a season of having our prayers answered for transformation. Any transformation in the world has to begin with a transformation of church.

I take great hope with the changes in society. Our post-modern world is more similar to the world of the New Testament than the world I grew up in – one shaped intellectually by the Enlightenment and ecclesiastically by Christendom. If we can respond to the changes this can be our best day. It can mean wonderful days for our society.

I am not going to focus strongly here on the changing shape. There are many excellent resources in print and on the web that can be obtained.²⁰ I will simply give you my conviction of the way forward. If we can focus on seeing the body released we will have some hope of the church changing. If we focus too much on changing the church we might never see the body released from the prison it has been in for centuries. Change has to take place and the emphasis has to be on a release of the saints not simply putting the right structures in place.²¹

From local church to church in the locality

The main emphasis on church particularly within Protestant models of church has been that of the local church. We have emphasised the need for believers

¹⁹*Liquid Church* (Peabody: Hendricksen, 2002).

²⁰Two recent books that I consider are worth reading in this respect are: Neil Cole *Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) and Alan Hirsch *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006). The centrality of the mission of the church in these books is refreshing and challenging.

²¹Putting the right structures in place can still end up with a top-down hierarchy which will soon become institutional where social power is conferred and concentrated at the top.

to belong to a local church. There they can be nurtured and cared for and find a place of accountability. Some of that might have been necessary and even helpful. However, the weakness has been that we have interpreted the Bible as if it states that local churches were what the apostles planted. But apostles did not plant local churches in the sense that we have them, rather they planted church in the locality. There was a geographical boundary to the churches that were planted and within those boundaries there was the very real sense of there being one church. To illustrate what I mean I use the following illustration: Paul planted a church in Corinth, but Peter did not come along at a later date and note that although there was the Paul expression of church, the city really needed the Peter expression. Rather as apostles they worked together in and for the one church.

Although there are very practical issues such as defining the (geographical) boundary to the one church it is very hard to move away from the concept of the church being one within a given region. The very term used for church, *ekklesia*, is most informative. It was a secular word used of the gathering of the city of those who through citizenship of that place had a shaping role in the life of the city. A couple of short quotes will prove very informative: *ekklesia* was 'the popular assembly of all the competent citizens of the *polis*, city'; it was the assembly where 'fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken'.²² In planting one church in a region Paul was planting those who through their involvement and commitment to that region were being called by God to have a shaping role in the future life of that region.

This indeed places a major mantle on the church and gives church a major role in society. Given this major call it is not surprising that Paul's desire for the church was that there would be an increase of faith in order to grow into the task. He makes this explicit in the Corinthian situation (2 Cor. 10:15,16). The church at Corinth was probably only around 150 or so people, for we know that 'the whole church' was hosted in the home of Gaius (Rom. 16:23) and that Corinth itself was a major city of something over 300,000 people. If these figures are close to accurate the church was only 0.05% of the population. I have often wondered what my prayer for a church in such a setting would be, and my guess is that I would encourage them to hold on but encourage them that we were praying that greater resources might be added to them. By way of contrast Paul hoped their faith would grow, and that as

22L. Coenen, article on 'Church' in Colin Brown (ed.), *The Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol. 1* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1975).

their faith grew that they would fill out that geographical area so as he in turn could be released to move on to 'lands beyond' them.

We now have considerably larger resources than the Corinthian church had but our resources are fragmented (and sometimes worse than that as we often find that the fragments are in competition with one another). If we wish to claim to model ourselves on the New Testament somewhere down the line we will need to answer the question 'how big is your church?' with an answer that is not simply reflective of the size of our local congregation, but begins to include all those who have bowed the knee to Christ within the territory assigned for us.

My point in all this is not to put forward a view that local church is dead or needs to die, but that we should no longer defend the view of local church as being biblical. I recently challenged a group of church leaders to put as their first point on their church promotional leaflet 'we are not a biblical church'! Although tongue-in cheek my point was to keep us focused on moving forward toward something that more resembles the New Testament. There will always be diverse expressions of the one church, and we must begin to embark on a journey of expressing church in the locality if we are to connect with the calling of church to shape up our region. That expression cannot simply be of doing mission at a given time but of being incarnated in the community.

Many of our concepts have to be challenged. The leadership of the one church in the city in the New Testament was also probably more fluid than we realise. Based on the Hebrew concept of eldership their primary function was not to oversee the minutiae of peoples' lives but to protect the environment where people lived their lives, so that the gifts could be developed and flourish. The one church gathered in many settings, but the primary setting was a life setting of the home. To meet in the home in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds was not simply the same as to meet in a cell in the twenty-first century. It was to meet in an environment where life was already taking place.

In writing what I am writing I am not being prescriptive, rather I am simply calling for a re-imagining the body of Christ so that we are both related to the twenty-first century and in line with the original apostolic shape. An expression of church in the locality also carries with it a further dimension that demands a new way of thinking.

Church connected to its locality

New Testament church was intended to be *in* the city or region. The believers were rooted in that place. For example, Corinth was much more than the place where believers happened to live – it was *their* place. The believers might have their citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20) but this was not understood as a hope that one day they would depart this evil world for a better place. Rather that, just as Philippi was an outpost of Rome in a foreign land, so the church was understood as an outpost of heaven in a foreign environment. It was there to imprint the area (indeed their area) with heaven. The place where they were planted was the very place where the gospel was being outworked for them.

The shift in thinking that is demanded by this concept is of moving from this being the church that I attend, or even this is the church where I work to this is *my* city, *my* piece of geography where God has asked *me* to take responsibility.

I remember taking two consecutive prayer weeks in a city in England. The second week was on the south side of the city, a part of the city that was impoverished both economically and spiritually. I was unsure as to how the pastor of the church that was hosting us was finding the week, but later found that it was a life-changing week for him. He was not originally from that city but had pastored there for 10 years and was considering that it might be his time to move on. Prior to that week he said that this city was the city where he worked, but God did a work in him that week that meant that the city became his city from that time on. He was now taking up his role in helping to pastor his city. It cannot be proved that the ensuing result is directly connected but I am deeply suspicious that it is. Not too long after this shift the church began to experience a minor, but unprecedented, breakthrough with a significant number of people beginning to spontaneously come to the church from a non-churched background.

There are three helpful words that have helped me focus on this aspect of the church rooted in the locality. The three words are: *FOLD*, *FIELD* and *FLOCK*. The flock need to come to the fold for healing, nurturing, sustenance, strength, care and direction, but they do not belong within the fold. They belong in the field and the field is the world. The fold is there to enable the flock to live life in the field. True spirituality does not consist of the activities of prayer and Bible reading but of living life as Jesus did, of being good news in a

hostile environment. If the flock do not come to the fold for refreshment, and if they do not engage in prayer and Bible reading it will not be long before true spirituality disappears, but it is also true that until the flock engages in the wider sphere we cannot claim to be expressing true spirituality. We can use other biblical analogies such as the leaven only being active when in the dough, or the salt needing to be salt of 'the earth'.

The implications of the two shifts above are: unity is not to be seen as a luxury, it is a necessity. This unity is not to be a unity that simply gives us a bigger church than we had before, but rather it is a unity that will connect us with our geography. It will be a unity that will honour our diversity as churches but will draw us together into the geography where we are.

Theological and world view shifts

Closing the gap between the spiritual and the material

The Greek world-view is the one that has tended to dominate the theological world. In this viewpoint the other world is the real world and so spiritual (non-material) existence is of the highest importance. Life after death is a key issue within this belief and salvation is often expressed as an escape from this world. The Hebraic world-view, however, was radically different to this. Here are some immediate and relevant differences:

The Greek hope for life after death becomes a hope for (physical) resurrection from the dead at the 'reversal'. Life after death was not a major issue for the Jew it was the hope of participating in the kingdom of God – which always had an earthly outworking. The controversy around the resurrection was precisely that. The claim was not that Jesus was alive but that he has risen bodily. This had enormous implications for the Jew and was a strange concept indeed for the Greeks.

Salvation expressed as a desire and even need of escape from an evil world becomes a commitment to the transformation of a fallen world. The movement shifts from being that of earth to heaven to the reverse. It moves away from the destruction of an evil (material) creation to an aspiration for its fulfilment. So creation was not seen as evil, but as fallen and in need of freedom.

The church does not become the goal in the sense of some sanctified

waiting room where we can sing our songs until we are taken to heaven, but becomes the agent of releasing people into the world. So we will be challenged to change from a mission to simply bringing people into the church to helping the church get out into the world. We will move from understanding the church sphere as the field to recognising the world as the field.

In summary as we grasp a shift here from Greek to Hebraic thinking we will be seeking to express the desired movement as from heaven to earth and out into the world through the church. (The Greek view, by way of contrast, would be take us out of the world, into the church, so as in due course we can be off and up to heaven.)

The relationship between individualism and the corporate

Most of us have been brought up with an underlying principle that democracy is the ideal to be aimed at. This idea that we all count equally is not totally wrong and there is something right about giving all responsible people a voice and a vote. But behind this view is often an elevation of the individual outside of any real corporate setting, an elevation of personal rights. Within the Hebrew world-view everyone has significance but within the whole.

Society is more than the sum total of individual lives and spiritually we also need to adjust our thinking so as we understand that there are corporate realities beyond and above the individual. We need a shift toward corporate thinking for it is through the church as a whole (and not just isolated individuals) that the manifest wisdom of God is to be made known to the principalities and powers.

The Greek way of thought has led us to the concept of the strong Christian that can survive alone. It has even fostered the belief that we can operate independently of one another and that we should develop our own independent ministry. It is not that such a view is totally wrong: for we do need to be able to survive even if all other believers were to fall, but there is the desire in Scripture for *the church as a whole* to stand up under the anointing of Jesus. It is the anointing that was on the head that is to come down over the body.

If we were able to grasp this corporate way of thinking we would have fewer problems and questions about many of the 'why does this happen', or 'why does God not do such and such' type of questions. Probably there are

fewer healings than we would like for the reason that the body as a whole has not grown up. (In 1 Corinthians 11:28,29 Paul gives his main reason why some have died prematurely and others are sick. He says it was because of a lack of discerning the body – through not living in wholesome relationships. And it is challenging to note that Paul does not say that only the ‘guilty’ had become sick.) There would be fewer demands for personal blessing if we understood the corporate nature of the covenant. When the Exile to Babylon took place we discover that righteous individuals like Ezekiel or Daniel also went into Exile and they never complained that God was not honouring his covenant with them now that they were the tail not the head. Those faithful people were in Exile because of sin, yet not their own, but the sin of their people. The covenant that we are in is a covenant that is made with the people of God as a whole and we need to realise that individuals in the church can be adversely affected through the faithlessness of the corporate people.

If we can accept this perspective, confession of sin becomes easier. We can far more readily confess that ‘we’ have sinned. It is interesting to note that the righteous who were in Exile had no problem confessing sin for they belonged to the people who had sinned. They were not caught in a paralysis seeking to analyse exactly who had sinned.

In prayer and warfare this perspective of corporate realities means that it is the corporate body that must rise up to deal with issues of warfare.

An understanding of corporate sin / curse and not simply individual sin

This follows on from the previous discussion. The effects of sin go beyond the immediate time when they were committed and they also go beyond the individual or even generation that committed those sins. Scripture talks of curses and blessings and although we should not come to Scripture simply gathering texts together to prove a point, we recognise that there are sowing and reaping scenarios which do not just affect the individual but can affect generations and even geographies.

The former concept is more readily accepted for there is the well-known Scripture about the sins being visited to the third and fourth generation. The Bible bears ample testimony that without repentance sin reaches a level over a period of time so that eventually judgement comes on a particular generation. This is how it was in Jesus’ day for he said that all the blood of the

innocent prophets shed was going to bring judgement on this generation (Lk. 11:49-51). This could well be the meaning behind the Pauline statement that in the fullness of time Jesus came (Gal. 4:4). It seems likely that Paul considered that sin had reached such a proportion that even the nation that was to be the redemptive light was itself now under an irreversible curse. All hope of them living up to their calling had gone, so Jesus came taking their curse upon himself, and in that sense died for the Jew first so that the blessing of Abraham might flow to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:13,14).

The concept of this trans-generational aspect to sin is not too hard to embrace, but there is also a geographical or land aspect to sin that I will develop in the next chapter. People and land are intrinsically related and when people commit sin upon land that land will be greatly affected.

The implications of these paradigm shifts are that we will be looking and praying for an increased manifestation of the impact of the kingdom of God in the here and now; that we will not be looking for an escapist salvation, but one of engagement with the territory. We will also have to consider how we relate to those who have gone before, how what has been sown in the past is affecting both our current generation and geography.

Practical paradigm shifts

The paradigm shifts that follow will draw upon the biblical and theological material above and also take the conclusions above further in practical application.

A commitment to land and territory

Repeatedly we have said that the kingdom of heaven is to come to earth. We are to till the ground and make it a fruitful place for the king to return to. In the Johannine account of Mary's encounter with Jesus there is an ironic aside when we read that Mary thought Jesus to be the gardener. Indeed this is his correct identity. Adam had departed the Garden where death had been pronounced, but this last Adam rises from the dead re-commissioning those who will work with him tilling the soil again. He truly is the gardener inviting co-workers into the field.

If we are to see an advance of the kingdom this will be expressed primarily geographically so we will need to reach out for those territorial

relationships that take us beyond our comfort zones. In those relationships we will discover that we are called together *to pastor and disciple a territory* not just a church. Our responsibility does not end with the walls of the church for the whole world is God's rightful habitation. There might be a specific call to pastor within the church, but the church is called to pastor the area where it is situated.

If we recognise that biblically there is only the church in a given city or region then the people are not simply in the church, but the church must be placed in the city / region. We have heard that Jesus has been asking for his church back. Why does he want it back? Because it belongs to him having bought it with a price is certainly one of the reasons. But I consider that he wants his church back in order to give it away to the cities and regions of our nations. The words from the lips of leaders that these are 'our people and our finances' must be silenced, for the people and the finances to fulfil the task are to be released for the sake of preparing the field for harvest.

These concepts lead to a new framework for unity. Unity is no longer about more and more churches joining an organisation, but it is about an increasing number being joined together around the land (or, perhaps better, the presence of the Lord in the region). With the land becoming the centre we move away from what has traditionally taken place where there is an organisation at the centre and those who join that organisation at a later time need to first pay their dues before their voice can be heard. Rather we move toward the situation where we all discover a new level of joining to each other, and around the land, as new people come on board. Each time there is an increase there is also a change in the nature of who we are, rather than simply an increase in the size of the pyramidal structure. In a very real sense we will be allowing, and perhaps even insisting that, the territory shape the church.

The church beyond the gathered setting

I unashamedly borrow this concept from Jim Thwaites book *The Church beyond the Congregation*. We must see church in its primary shape as not gathered around a pulpit nor communion table but as the people of God involved in all of life, so that the church can be 'his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Ephes. 1:23). If Christ is to be found throughout all things and his right is to fill all of creation we will never be able to connect with his

fullness until we connect with where he is to be found. A church meeting with a corresponding parochial agenda will never be able to contain the fullness of Christ, but when the people of God have been released to fill out all the spheres where the claims of God are being made. Then when we meet together the purpose of that gathering is to be a support for the church seeking to express the fullness of Christ in all creation. The church can begin to grow into that fullness but only when there is this expression beyond the gathered setting.

So the task of the body is to empower the saints in every sphere, to close the gap between the sacred and the secular. The highest calling is to follow Christ wherever he leads. If ever we need Spirit filled people in the whole dynamic of life and society it is now.

Unity events often gather pastors and intercessors but others tend not to get involved. So unity must be expressed beyond a meeting and the concept of the church beyond the congregation leads also to a new understanding of unity. The church *is* united at the point where the saints of all diverse church backgrounds find themselves - in the market place. The church is united in the context of creation; the task of the congregation is to equip the people for the engagement of all creation.

It leads to a new purpose and setting not only for church but also for the ministries God has set in the church. Ministries need also to direct their anointing and gifting into supporting the church as it comes together beyond the gathered setting. There is the need for humble prophetic and apostolic input into the very places and institutions where the people of God are living out their faith. The manifold wisdom of God needs to be expressed in all of secular society so that the world becomes a place where the sacred presence of Christ is manifest.

These issues are key for a long-term breakthrough in spiritual warfare. It can sound rather radical but in truth it is simply refocusing the church on the original setting that it was given: multiply and fill all of creation.

Once the church (the various expressions in relationship with one another) is placed in the right location - as defined by the specific geography and the 'secular' society we will discover that there is:

- Grace to reach the city / territory

There is no mismatch between what is planted in a region and the challenges

of that region. Paul could claim in a 10-12 year period that he had run out of territory having fully proclaimed from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern Albania) the gospel (Rom. 15:18-20). One can only accept that perspective if the viewpoint is held that the churches planted in their localities had grace to reach their area. In order to connect with that grace we need to embrace the church in the locality and allow for faith to rise.

- The resources of the locality become more accessible to the church

There are resources that are locked up in cities and regions. If local church is my container then my resources will come out of that container; if it is church in the locality then there is a larger resource; but if the church in the locality is placed within that locality as a whole doors begin to open to the church and the church begins to make a connection with the resources of that place.

I am not suggesting that the resources will come automatically, but the ability to connect is vital. When we connect we begin to expose what we connect with to the presence of God. Like the High priest of Israel we begin to carry what we represent, and are connected to, into the Holy of Holies. If we are not connected we can only pray for a place ('God bless this place') but once we connect we can begin to take a place with us as we pray to the throne of grace - we begin to say to a place, 'We are taking you with us into the presence of God'. We can never connect to the extent that the High Priest did to Israel for there was a covenant at work there, and we will not connect to the extent that Jesus did on the cross for sinful humanity, for his identification with sinful humanity was total, but nevertheless we can make a meaningful connection that exposes the place and people we are connected to, through prayer, to the presence of God. As we connect and care God begins to soften the hearts of those who hold the resources and we find the church can begin to become the receptor of those resources.

- Workers for the field get released

Resources are multi-faceted and people are a major part of the resource. There are workers that the Lord wants us to call for to come into the harvest field. It is important that we understand that they are not coming simply for our fold, to enhance our church. Jesus spoke the words about workers in the context of lifting up his eyes and seeing the harvest field. It is to people who can see the harvest field, and who will reposition themselves for it that workers are coming.

- Help to reach the city

Once we move forward with a church in and throughout the locality expressing a desire to release heaven to earth through the church there is help that can come to reach the locality. There are tribes who will be called to cross over to help us (Num. 32). There are connections with ministries and people that God wishes to give us. They might have no connection today with our locality, or with our particular stream or denomination, but God desires to give us a connection. God-given connections release a multiplication not simply an addition (Scripture indicates that one may put 1000 to flight, but that two will put 10,000 to flight).

There is a challenge currently lying with those with apostolic and prophetic ministries for there is a strong call to move beyond that of being prophetic and apostolic to a defined stream or denomination. Indeed I suggest that to be apostolic or prophetic in the current thrust of the Spirit that it is vital to become apostolic and prophetic to places and people that are expressing the unity of the body. It is time for partnership with the church in the locality to be expressed - it is time to live and minister on the basis that the 'day of the streams is over, the day of the river is here'.

I am convinced that God wants to give us resources but we need to position ourselves not for the church but for mission. We need to adopt the paradigm shifts that God is bringing to us, leaving behind old petty jealousies and begin to partner with others for the sake of the harvest.