Mission After Christendom
- Mission from the margins of society

THE LEGACY OF CHRISTENDOM

From the centre to the margins

The second significant cultural shift currently taking place is from the sacral society of *Christendom* to what we can only at present call *post-Christendom*, because we cannot yet see what will replace a system that has been dominant in western culture for so many centuries.

Later in the Workshop course we will look in greater detail at the Christendom system and examine its implications for various aspects of church life and discipleship. Here we will concentrate on its impact on mission – and especially on the evangelistic dimension of mission. We will need to explore history a little in order to make sense of certain things, but we will leave much of the story until later in the year.

One way of describing the change that is taking place is that the church, which for centuries was at the centre of culture, is now on the margins and is gradually facing the challenge of engaging in mission from the margins rather than from the centre. Things look rather different from the margins.

Why evangelism is unpopular

Most people, if asked, would not want to be evangelised! Why not? The word itself means 'giving someone good news'. What is so threatening about that? What images, fears or expectations are associated with this word? What is the contemporary view of evangelism and evangelists? Where did this come from?

There may be various reasons, including the unhelpful antics, dubious morality and inappropriate methods of some contemporary evangelists, persistent misrepresentation in the media, insensitivity by enthusiastic but unwise church members, spiritual warfare, etc. But, at root, the unpopularity of evangelism derives from the Christendom era and the Christendom mindset. To explain this, we will need to investigate how evangelism was understood in the Christendom centuries and how the Christendom shift impacted evangelism. We'll start by going back just 500 years to the Reformation – though we will need to go back further than this to understand where things started to go wrong.

The reformers and mission

Actor Michael Caine is famous for the phrase 'Not a lot of people know that.' Well, 'not a lot of people know that' the reformers did not really see 16th-century Europe as a mission field. Protesting against widespread abuses, challenging doctrinal errors and superstitions, the reformers were a first-generation movement of reform and renewal

that profoundly affected church and society. But they rarely engaged in evangelism. Most taught that the Great Commission had been fulfilled centuries earlier and was simply not applicable in their generation. They insisted that the office of evangelist had died out with the apostles and prophets, leaving pastors and teachers to lead the churches. They turned Catholic churches into Reformed churches wherever they had liberty and governmental support to achieve this, but they did not generally plant new churches. They did not evangelise their contemporaries. Why?

Fundamentally, the reformers accepted the presupposition of the previous millennium that Europe was Christian. Following the adoption, early in the 4th century, by the Roman emperor Constantine, of Christianity as the state religion, and the subsequent decision at the end of that century by the emperor Theodosius to outlaw all other religions, the church gradually shifted from operating in *mission* mode to operating in *maintenance* mode, at least within the boundaries of what soon became known as Christendom. The imperial invitation to the church to become, in effect, the religious department of the empire revolutionised the idea of mission, along with many other aspects of Christian faith and practice. Over the next few centuries Christianity was spread by force of arms and persuasion until the whole of western Europe was officially Christian. Church and state were now the pillars of a sacral society, where dissent was suppressed and almost everyone was assumed to be Christian by birth rather than by choice. Infant baptism marked the obligatory entry into this Christian society.

From being a powerless and sometimes persecuted minority that nevertheless could not refrain from talking about their faith in Jesus and his impact on their lives, the church had become a powerful institution that could impose its beliefs and practices on society. Evangelism was no longer a winsome invitation to choose a deviant and dangerous way of living, and to join a community that was puzzling and yet strangely attractive. The church's mission now involved:

- Ensuring doctrinal conformity
- Enforcing church attendance
- Enshrining moral standards in the criminal law
- Eradicating choice in the area of religion.

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

Evangelism in its New Testament sense became irrelevant. If the whole empire (with the perennially awkward exception of the Jews) was now 'Christian', it was obsolete. The role of the church was to provide pastoral care and teaching, and to ensure that church members were good citizens. Church leadership was essentially maintenance-oriented. Pastors and teachers were needed, but apostles had died out, evangelists were redundant and prophets were a nuisance in an established church committed to supporting, rather than challenging, the status quo. Church leaders declared that, at least within Christian Europe, the Great Commission had been fulfilled.

2

For over a thousand years this remained the orthodox view, with only marginalised radical groups, like the Waldensians and Lollards, dissenting. Among these groups, the ministries of apostles, prophets and evangelists were sometimes rediscovered, maintenance was set firmly in a mission context, and something closer to New Testament evangelism was restored.

The Protestant Reformation challenged neither the Christendom framework nor the demise of mission. But their contemporaries, the Anabaptists, rejected Christendom as a delusion and designated Europe as a mission field. To the reformers, as to their Catholic opponents, this was an affront, and dangerous to both church and society. One of the few subjects on which Catholics and Protestants agreed in this era was that Anabaptism was subversive and needed to be eradicated. The Catholics tended to burn Anabaptists, the Protestants normally beheaded them, but both operated on similar Christendom assumptions and applied similar Christendom methods.

Christendom, of course, survived the challenge represented by Anabaptism. The monolithic medieval Christendom was fractured into competing Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed mini-Christendoms, and the seeds of the 'free churches' had been sown. In time, under the cumulative pressure of the Enlightenment, secularisation, urbanisation and pluralisation, Christendom would wither. But for centuries still, the Christendom mentality would dominate European Christianity and ensure that the church was still oriented towards maintenance rather than mission. Ecclesiology and missiology were disconnected. David Bosch writes: 'The Reformation definitions of the Church were silent on its missionary dimensions. Ecclesiological definitions were almost exclusively preoccupied with matters concerning the purity of doctrine, the sacraments and church discipline. Mission had to content itself with a position on the church's periphery.'

Christendom-style evangelism

Evangelism returned in the latter years of the Christendom era in two modes: first, as mission to the non-Christian world outside Europe (first by Catholics, then Moravians, Baptists and other Protestants); and second, as a response to the rather belated recognition that Europe was, at best, only nominally Christian.

But evangelism was still operating within a Christendom framework.

- Within Europe, it was assumed that the Christian story and the main tenets of the Christian message were familiar, so evangelism primarily involved repeated attempts to re-energise faith and commitment that seemed lukewarm. The emphasis was on calling people to make a renewed commitment to the implications of the gospel and to express this by activities such as reading the Bible, attending church more regularly, living morally respectable lives, and meeting the needs of others in a society without a welfare state.
- Beyond Europe, despite the heroic and often exemplary efforts of dedicated pioneer missionaries, evangelism too often degenerated into attempts to coerce or induce conversion and to impose a supposedly Christian and superior European culture on other societies.

3

While Christendom remained relatively intact, these approaches to evangelism were not perceived as problematic, but the gradual demise of Christendom has changed this perception. In post-Christendom this history has left the churches with a legacy that is at best ambivalent and has left contemporary society with a justifiable suspicion of any kind of evangelistic initiatives. This is because Christendom-style evangelism is not good news for contemporary society, nor an appropriate way for Christians to operate in a changed and changing climate. To a significant degree it never was, but only now are we coming to recognise this. Even now the reasons for our disquiet are not always apparent. If we are to evangelise our contemporary, post-Christendom society, we will need to understand these reasons and look for a new model of evangelism that is both more consonant with the New Testament and more appropriate for our society.

So what were the objectionable features of evangelism under Christendom?

The use of force to spread the gospel. European Christendom developed into the most powerful civilisation on earth – economically, politically, technologically and militarily. The assumption was that this achievement was a sign of God's favour and that Europeans therefore had a divine responsibility not only to evangelise but also to civilise other cultures. To accomplish these dual goals, force could be used where necessary.

Another significant consequence of the Christendom shift had been the abandonment of the traditional commitment of the church to peace and non-coercion. In its place new stances developed, of which the most popular were the 'Just War' and the 'Holy War' positions. The Just War position was a Christianised version of classical Roman thinking on when force was justified – or as its opponents argued a corruption of the church by pagan ideas. The Holy War, or Crusade, was derived (like so much in the early years of Christendom) from a way of reading the Old Testament and so was more 'biblical' than the Just War position but also more frightening. Often in practice there were elements of both approaches in the arguments of individuals and nations. Both allowed or required Christians to fight on behalf of their nation or civilisation.

Since evangelising and civilising were both regarded as God's calling on European Christians, the use of force might be applied to either end or both together. And in many situations the Bible and the sword went together. Missionaries and adventurers, evangelists and conquistadors, travelled together and supported each other in their related callings and purposes. Happily, there were occasions when the presence and intervention of missionaries prevented acts of injustice, cruelty and oppression – this aspect of the story is often not given as much credit as it deserves. But too often the work of evangelism was carried out by imposition rather than invitation, leading to forcible conversions and baptisms at sword point.

Within Christendom, too, evangelism – understood as indicated above (ensuring conformity, enforcing church attendance, etc.) – was often coercive. Because of the close identification of religion and politics, church and state, heresy was regarded as subversive. Not believing what you were expected to believe was treasonous as well as doctrinally deviant. Within and beyond Christendom, evangelism was carried out by the powerful on the powerless, and conformity was coerced.

The use of inducements to spread the gospel. In the early years of Christendom, it suddenly became socially advantageous to be a Christian. Now that the emperor was a church member and the state was Christian, those who wanted to be promoted to high office found that professing Christianity was significant (not that much seems to have changed in US presidential campaigns!). This situation was a radical change from pre-Christendom, where Christian faith was a barrier to social advancement. It was in the army where this change was most apparent: by the end of the 4th century only Christians could serve in the Roman army.

And when Christendom missionaries took the gospel to other places they continued to operate in this way. As well as blatant examples of bribery to win converts, there were less obvious but equally dubious forms of inducement. One of these is the well-known phenomenon of 'rice Christians', where those who expressed faith in Christ knew they would be rewarded with all kinds of material assistance. In other contexts those who converted could expect favourable treatment by the colonial authorities. It could be argued, of course, that this was simply extending to other cultures the benefits of a Christian civilisation, but not everyone saw it this way – especially those who rejected these inducements and those who experienced exploitation at the hands of those who represented the gospel.

Anti-Semitism. The story of the treatment of the Jews in Christendom is one of the more shameful aspects of European church history. The Jews fitted no more easily into a Christianised Roman Empire than a pagan one. In a unitary culture they stood out as different, nonconformist and threatening. Furthermore, as some theologians and priests insisted, the Jews were the 'Christ-killers', responsible for the death of Jesus (whose own Jewishness seems to have been forgotten). The Holocaust, carried out by a Christendom nation, was another horrific expression of a long history of oppression, victimisation, coercion, persecution and bigotry.

Cultural imposition. When Christendom missionaries evangelised other cultures, they not only used coercion and inducements ('flattery and battery'), but they brought with them the assumption that their own culture, being Christian, was superior to all others. Christendom had eradicated any tension between gospel and culture, so that European civilisation was regarded as Christian, and missionaries were disempowered from differentiating between gospel and culture enough to contextualise the gospel into another culture.

The tendency of Christendom evangelists, therefore, was to denigrate or demonise the cultural values and practices of others, while treating the values and practices of their own culture as superior and godly. This resulted in the imposition of European culture and the suppression of indigenous elements. Converts were required to adopt a certain theology, dress in certain ways, erect church buildings in certain styles, sing songs to European tunes and in multiple other ways replace their own culture with that of the evangelists. The result of this was to detach converts from their own people and to make them dependent on the missionaries. It also communicated the message that Christianity was a European religion, which had significant long-term consequences.

5

Top-down evangelism. Within Christendom, too, evangelism often carried with it certain cultural overtones and expectations. Because church and state were partners, and church leaders were respected members of the establishment, evangelism was imposed from the top of society by those who were educated, articulate, wealthy and powerful. This impacted the message preached, which was often moralistic and generally inculcated conformity to upper- or middle-class culture. Sin was presented as nonconformity to the values of this culture.

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

Maintenance and mission

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

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

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

A frequent response to the perceived need to engage both in mission and maintenance has been to develop specialist groups to engage in mission with the support of the church. The church in its congregational and institutional form is thereby freed to concentrate on maintenance, and church members who are able and willing to engage in mission activities can be seconded to these groups. From the Celtic mission bands

6

and medieval monastic orders, to the plethora of contemporary missionary societies, there is a long and honourable history of such organisations. The globalisation of the church, and its evangelistic and social impact on human society, would not have been achieved without them. But some missiologists have questioned the legitimacy of this division of roles, especially if these structures do not interact effectively.

Anabaptist missiologist George Peters argues that the history of Protestant missions is predominantly the history of missionary societies and individual pioneers, rather than the church in mission. He attributes this development among Protestants to four features of the 16th-century Reformation: the absence of a coherent missiology among the reformers; their failure to establish churches free from state control; the teaching of some reformers that mission was the responsibility of individuals rather than the churches; and their inability, due to the low spiritual state of their churches, to engage in mission. He describes this as 'an unfortunate and abnormal historic development which has produced autonomous, missionless churches on the one hand and autonomous churchless missionary societies on the other hand'.

Others have argued that this diversification of roles is not just a pragmatic solution to persistent institutional inertia, but a theologically sound and biblically justified strategy. Ralph Winter does not accept that mission agencies are unfortunate and abnormal, describing them instead as one of the 'two structures of God's redemptive mission'. He argues that from New Testament times both structures have been crucial for the church to fulfil its calling. Although Winter acknowledges that, at times, the partnership necessary for both structures to operate effectively has been lacking, he insists that this division of labour is appropriate and divinely ordained.

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

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

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

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

7

MISSION IN POST-CHRISTENDOM

Implications for mission

What are the implications for mission of this cultural shift from Christendom to post-Christendom? We will explore this further in later sessions, but here are some initial points:

- Churches under Christendom, as we have seen, operated in 'pastoral mode', but in post-Christendom culture they must operate in 'mission mode'. This will require a paradigm shift, whereby mission is not bolted on to church programmes but is recovered as the purpose of the church.
- It is vital to recognise that a post-Christendom society is not the same as a pre-Christendom society. Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that modern society is 'a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar'. Similarly David Bosch writes: 'Is a secularised and dechristianised European … a not-yet-Christian or a no-more Christian? Such a person is a post-Christian rather than a pre-Christian. This calls for a special approach in communicating the gospel.'
- In a pre-Christendom society, Christianity is 'news', presenting another religious and social option. There is a freshness and challenge about it that demands a response. In a post-Christendom society it is difficult to persuade people that Christianity has anything fresh to offer. The assumption is that it has been tried and found wanting, and that wherever else answers to spiritual questions are to be found, it is not in Christianity. Evangelism in a post-Christendom context is faced with the task not just of persuading people that Christianity is true but of even gaining a hearing for something widely regarded as passé.
- Strategic planning is essential and radical changes are needed in the training and job descriptions of church leaders. Lesslie Newbigin writes: 'It is frequently said that the Church in Britain is now in a missionary situation. It is not clear that the full meaning of this has been understood. We have lived for so many centuries in the "Christendom" situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations. In a situation of declining numbers, the policy has been to abandon areas (such as the inner cities) where active Christians are few and to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in the places where there are enough Christians to support them. Needless to say, this simply accelerates the decline. It is the opposite of a missionary strategy, which would proceed in the opposite direction – deploying ministers in the areas where Christian presence is weakest.'
- Many assumptions which were reasonable under Christendom are no longer so in a post-Christendom society: going to church is not a normal social activity; there is widespread ignorance of the Christian story; and we no longer live in a 'guilt culture' – so what is the good news for those who do not feel guilty? We will explore this further in a later session.
- We must engage with a complex situation, recognising that in a society that seems to be secular there is evidence of both *residual religion* – vestiges from

8

Christendom, memories of faith, ceremonies and superstitions, marginal beliefs – and *resurgent religion* – reactions against secularism, importing religious beliefs from other cultures or recovering ancient paganism. Different strategies will be needed for different groups and individuals in our society.

- But there are real advantages in this context: nominal Christianity is declining and churches are increasingly made up of committed Christians who are there by choice or those who are searching for spiritual reality and are exploring Christianity; the churches may find freedom from the distorting influence of wealth, power, coercion and status that distracted them under Christendom.

Characteristics of mission

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

- It might involve educating church members about Christendom and its effects and deciding which way to face – back to Christendom or away from it;
- It might involve trying to root out some of the remaining vestiges of Christendom as inappropriate and unjust in a plural society;
- It might involve insisting on the importance of free choice and defending the rights of minorities – including those with whom Christians disagree;
- It might involve equipping Christians to offer contributions on social and political issues as a prophetic minority rather than a moral majority;
- It might involve fresh theological insights as we listen to our culture and discover what the good news is in a society that dismisses guilt but longs for meaning, identity and belonging.

Reading and Resources

D Bosch, *Witness to the World*, Marshalls, 1980
C Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, Routledge, 2001
D Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Trinity, 1996
A Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Trinity, 1999
S Murray, *Church Planting – Laying Foundations*, Paternoster, 1998
S Murray, *Post-Christendom*, Paternoster, 2004
S Murray *Church after Christendom* pub Paternoster 2005
L Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, SPCK, 1989
D Smith, *Mission After Christendom*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003
R Warren, *Being Human, Being Church*, Marshall Pickering, 1995
R Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations*, Church House, 1995