Summer July, 1997

The Beginning and End of the Church

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Christianity is very good at beginnings. People may disagree about the historicity of the Gospels, about the nature of truth contained in them or about the standard of writing in terms of classical Greek style, but no one could quibble about their beginnings (with the possible exception of Matthew). Familiarity may dull their impact, but the start of Mark's, Luke's and John's Gospels are classic ways to introduce a narrative. Perhaps that is not particularly surprising, bearing in mind that Christianity and Judaism are both religions that are essentially 'stories'. The two faiths are the narrative of God's salvation history with creation and with specific people (and individuals) in the world. Indeed, perhaps the most well-known beginning ever written comes from this tradition: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...’ (Genesis 1:1).

But where does the story of the Church begin? This has been a notoriously difficult question to answer. Even the matter of whether Jesus intended to found a church has not been satisfactorily settled. And if the answer is in the affirmative, there's the further question of what do we mean by 'church', and whether Jesus intended to break completely with the Jewish faith in which he was nurtured? These are historical questions, to which there are no immediate and generally agreed conclusions. Perhaps the issue of whether or not Jesus intended to start a church is irrelevant since, whatever his intention, we have one anyway! Instead, we could approach the matter from the other end of the historical spectrum and ask where does the church begin now?

Carl S Dudley has argued in Affectional and Directional Orientations to Faith (Alban Institute 1982) that many of the conflicts experienced in local congregations, and in the Church as a whole can be more clearly understood by seeing them as the result of two contrasting approaches to the Christian faith. One strand is committed to living within the world, while the other has its rationale in withdrawal from it. These approaches not only have different theologies but have very different readings of the story of the faith, starting right at the beginning with the accounts of Creation. The style of faith that is based on living within the world Dudley calls relational, and it views the world as fundamentally good, since it was created by God, and that God is involved in working with and through creation, rather than seeking to overcome it. Whereas the style of faith that is based on withdrawal from the world Dudley calls rigorous, and that starts from the
Fall and the idea that creation is evil and must be overcome, by a God who is an all-powerful, transcendent figure and who will ultimately make everything subject to the divine will.

From these two understandings of God's relationship to the world, two very different theologies of the Church emerge, which Dudley summarizes as follows:

**Relational Faith** -
1. Faith is discovered *within* a believing community (symbolized in infant baptism).
2. Community consciousness precedes individuality.
3. In a world created good, group life provides a place to shed the exterior pressures of the world, and to celebrate oneness in Spirit.
4. Land, family and geographic community form the physical foundation through which faith is shared.
5. Relational faith is sustained by a sense of tradition and a flow of events evoking a sense of permanence.
6. God is ‘felt’ to be in the midst of the community, identified with people, places and particular ways of doing things. (God is immanent.)

**Rigorous Faith** -
1. Faith begins when the believer qualifies by acknowledging his or her need for God.
2. The community is composed of individuals who work together for individual rewards and a common end.
3. In a world of evil people, believers must struggle to restrain sin and create a better future.
4. Individual effort and tireless productivity provide evidence that faith is genuine.
5. Rigorous faith prepares for change and finds satisfaction in measuring its gains.
6. God is beyond time and space. (God is transcendent.)

The ways in which different writers perceive the role and tasks of the Church illustrate Dudley’s analysis. For example, Peter Brierley’s book *Vision Building* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989) exhibits several characteristics of a rigorous orientation to faith. It emphasizes the importance of the individual, for example this section on visions for the Church:

> Visions are personal. Essentially, they relate to an individual. Virtually all visions in the Scriptures come to a single person... The vision may be come to be shared
with a group, and followed maybe by hundreds, but the prime mover is usually just one person. (p 28)

Brierley also takes a very unitary approach to faith, that is, everything is broken down into statistics, graphs and tables. The five tables and three graphs contained on pages 72-78 are just one instance of an approach that pervades his work. Making a step of faith is clearly very important and evangelism is described in strong rigorist tones as a ‘key motivator’ (p 163). This is because ‘we live in a needy world and there are dying souls who need to be brought in’ (p 164). Underlying all this is the question of boundaries; the image that Brierley uses is that of the building, in particular the metaphor of the threshold. People need to be brought ‘in’. They need to be moved from one place to another; they need to be brought quite clearly from the outside to the inside, from a state of lack of commitment to a state of commitment.

A contrasting approach is found in Wesley Carr's collaborative book *Say One For Me: The Church of England in the Next Decade* (SPCK, 1992). One of the key points made there is that: ‘The Church of England was created as an institution of universal national belonging, with the rights and duties which that position entails, in a context of limited religious toleration and ultimately of open religious plurality’ (p 105). The picture that Wesley Carr and his fellow authors paint is of the Church of England (as we have it now) being a more relationist church, although it always had its rigorist strands. But the parish system, the open policy on baptism and weddings, the established nature of the church all bear witness to the essential nature of the institution. This is quite clearly an area of some tension, between those who claim ‘rites as well as rights’ and those who are part of the ‘cult’ and look after the ‘holy of holies’. One of the advantages of the parochial system (whatever its problems) is that it helps to keep the focus of the church on the community, and not on itself.

A key image for Carr that of a church that is ‘tattered at its edges’ (p 121). Again this metaphor describes the boundaries. Carr points to the forces at work within society and within the Church itself that are trying to ensure that the Church eradicates all differences of role, is totally consistent and completely self-sufficient. These are all the hall-marks of a rigorist church, that is, a church that has taken on board the values of a commercial organization, a church that values productivity and a church that is reluctant to truly engage with the society in which it exists. A church with tattered edges, argues Carr, more accurately reflects the incarnational style of the Christian faith – a faith in which God engages reciprocally with the world and with creation. A church with tattered edges more truly reflects the diversity that is apparent in
creation and has been apparent in Christianity from the very outset. And a church with tattered edges is more geared to allowing relationships to develop in their own way and at their own pace, rather than be forced to conform to a specific rigorist timetable.

So much for this overview of the ‘beginning’ of the Church, but where does it ‘end’? I use that word in a deliberately ambiguous way and want to examine where it ends and what are its ends. In this respect the insights of Nils Brunsson from The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations (Wiley, 1989) will give us a similar, but significantly different, angle on evangelism and the task of the Church.

THE END OF THE CHURCH?

Brunsson begins his analysis with the observation that modern organizations are often exposed to inconsistent demands from their environments. The problem then, is how to deal with these competing requests. He suggests that there are generally two responses to this situation: action organizations and political organizations.

Action Organizations

These respond to the competing needs of its environment in the following way:

1. Firm agreement. Conflict is bad for an action orientated organization and it tries to avoid it, because everyone needs to be pulling in the same direction. This will often be done through a strong hierarchy.

2. Strong organizational ideology. This again cuts down conflict, and also restricts freedom of action and thought. While it may sound like "Big Brother", its intention is to enable people to behave in such a way as to generate organised action.

3. Consistency. The ideology and the action must be in harmony with each other. The action will reflect the talk and decisions in the organization. There is no ‘one thing being decided and another thing being done’.

4. Specialization. The action ideology will be precise, complex and consistent; and therefore only concerned with a limited section of reality. The number of possible actions is very restricted.

5. Solutions Focused. The organization is geared to solutions rather than problems

6. Confidence. Action is easier when the organization is confident and when people are convinced their view of the world is the right one. Again, conflict is a hindrance.
7. **Limited Rationality.** The action organization needs a simplified model of reality and how it functions within that model. Complicated models and critical approaches do not help action.

**Political Organizations**

These offer a different model of responding to the same set of circumstances:

1. **Output.** The ‘product’ of the political organization is not necessarily tangible. Its essential output is decisions or words. The political organization reflects a complex environment which is full of inconsistent ideas and competing convictions.

2. **Embraces several ideologies.** Different opinions can be embraced, even exploited. The abundance of ideologies encourages criticism and debate, which in turn means that these organizations should be better than action organizations at understanding a complex and change-prone world.

3. **Follows norms of rational decision-making.** Conflict is accommodated in its decision making and can discuss several alternative possible solutions.

4. **Problem-centred.** Insoluble problems are a very good means of reflecting many different ideas and values, and can be approached from all sorts of angles.

5. **Generalises rather than specialises.** ‘Any political organization that wants to grow... will actively seek to incorporate new ideas in the environment into its own organization. No group need be left outside its domain. The organization grows by reflecting an increasing number of inconsistencies’ (p 23).

6. **Mistrust and scepticism are encouraged.** Freedom of ideas is not curtailed by pressure for co-ordinated action. In this sort of organization part of its task is to criticize the status quo.

7. **Produces ideologies.** Apart from producing decisions (as opposed to action), the political organization is also good at producing and promoting ideology. And one of the strong ideological outputs of organizations is talk.

Applying these insights to the churches can produce some very interesting results – particularly in one area of ministry that I have experience of. The two different approaches to ministry in higher education illustrate Brunsson’s ideas very clearly. For example, Christian Unions (CUs) that are affiliated to the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) have all the hallmarks of action organizations. There is great stress on agreement and a firm statement of what Christianity is all about, plus a feeling that internal conflict is ‘bad’. This agreement is maintained by a strong organizational ideology. The eleven-point UCCF doctrinal
basis, which every Christian Union officer and speaker has to sign, is often criticised as overly restrictive of thought and discussion. But it is necessary for this type of group since it stops disagreement and curtails ideological debate. The ideology itself is usually linked to a clear set of aims and objectives. The principle aim of the group is evangelism and the doctrinal basis is both consistent with this and an aid to the process.

Christian Unions tend to be concerned for personal commitments of faith which, again, is entirely consistent with an action rather than a political organization. Some of the problems that socially concerned Christianity is engaging with are the problems that have either no, or very difficult, solutions. The CUs are focussed on the apparently much more straightforward issue of personal salvation. It is a great deal easier to measure effectiveness in terms of ‘converts’ or numbers at meetings than to measure the amount of rainforest saved or homeless people cared for. That in turn has a pay-off in terms of confidence. A strong organizational ideology gives people a conviction that their world-view is correct, and it also gives them a clear measurement-by-results way of responding to that outlook.

On the other hand, Chaplaincies are often clear examples of political organizations. Frequently they are ecumenical, ie a coalition of different Christian ideologies which embraces people of very different outlooks. So a chaplaincy may be ministering to conservative Roman Catholics, evangelical Methodists, radical Quakers and those who are not committed to any one denomination. In this respect, a chaplaincy can often seem very ‘fuzzy’ to an action-orientated person. There may be no apparent strategy, no clear ideology and no firm product at the end of things. Even while a Chaplaincy may wish ‘to win people for Christ’, it is far from clear which vision of Christ people are being ‘won’ for.

These two groups are frequently suspicious of the way each presents the faith—the CUs often see chaplaincies as too revisionist and chaplaincies see CUs as too simplistic. Both positions are readily understandable in the light of Brunsson—in fact we should expect that the two groups will fail to see each other’s position. All these areas of tension exist when it is the case that just one religion (i.e. Christianity) is involved, but if the chaplaincy has an inter-faith element as well, then the gulf between the two groups is magnified, not necessarily because of innate bigotry or intolerance, but because the two groups are set up to be entirely different organizations with quite contrasting functions.

If that is true in one area of the churches’ combined ministry, imagine how things stand when it comes to the churches’ ministry as a whole? It does not really make matters any more straightforward if we look at one particular denomination. As any Methodist Minister, Baptist
pastor, Anglican vicar or Catholic priest will testify, theirs is a broad church. All denominations are broad churches, with a great range of opinions and views. Taken as a whole, most churches can be seen as very good examples of Brunsson's political organization. People have very different understandings of what end the Church as a whole should be serving. For some it is an action organization that should be seeking new converts to the faith and new members for Christ's Body. For others, the Church should be entering into dialogue about the serious issues of the day, and encouraging all humanity to live in harmony as part of God's creation. Are these two ends not ultimately irreconcilable?

**THE TELOS OF THE CHURCH**

It is an over simplification to say that the group or church which ‘begins’ with rigorous commitment, must ‘end’ as an action organization with a strong ideology. There are certainly strong links, but the relationship is much more complex. The same is true of a fellowship that ‘begins’ with a relational approach to faith. It does not, of necessity, have to ‘end’ as a political organization, but again there can often be a bond between the two styles of faith and organization. One danger is that we lose sight dialectical nature of the two metaphors (the relational/rigorist view and the action/political outlook) and fail to engage with the tension that they produce. It is important to keep in mind that both Dudley and Brunsson stress the tendencies which they identify can appear in the same group (and the same person!). Indeed, Brunsson makes the further point: ‘The two models are mutually dependent, in the sense that each makes possible the existence of the other’ (p 196 – my italics). The question that follows is: given this analysis, which of these two roles is the Church to play? Should its telos (its aim, goal or purpose) be a rigorist and action oriented one or relational and political character? Or should its function be to affirm both roles?

Drawing on their experience in universities Robin Gill and Derek Burke have argued that the Church should learn from higher education by embracing strategic thinking and other techniques from the world of business management in what appears to be a strongly rigorist/action approach. Alternatively Alasdair MacIntyre proposes a quite different vision of universities as places of: ‘constrained disagreement, of imposed participation in conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into conflict.” If the Church was modelled on this view then it would take on a more relational and political role. One person who has particularly developed this theatrical metaphor for organizations is Iain L. Mangham and in the context of his discussion of MacIntyre’s ideas he refers to a similar dialectic which he terms a ‘liberal/communitarian split’ – with the liberals tending to be economists who stress ‘atomistic and egotistical behaviour’ and ‘the market as the mechanism for sorting out our
relations’ while communitarians tend to be sociologists who ‘announce their presence by
declaiming that there is more to life in organizations than crude self-interest and, if there is not,
there ought to be’. Mangham agrees with MacIntyre’s accent on the narrative community but
argues that two additional and crucial factors for those characters who are acting out this
dialectical drama are imagination and creativity. Consequently, those organizations which give a
role to imagination and creativity in the handling of moral issues are more virtuous than those
who do not. If the organizational telos\textsuperscript{12} of the Church is communal virtue and Mangham is
correct in the importance he gives to imagination and creativity in its corporate moral behaviour,
then the criteria for assessing the life of the body of Christ may look less like those of the
rigorist, action or liberal models presently employed and more like the relational, political or
communitarian metaphors currently ignored at the other end of the spectrum.

Notes
\textsuperscript{1} A version of this paper was given at the \textit{Network for the Study of Implicit Religion} and I am also grateful to
Edward Bailey, Clive Marsh, Bernard Silverman and David Sims for commenting on an earlier draft.
\textsuperscript{2} Human life ‘can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell
themselves and one another. This runs contrary to the popular belief that a story is there to “illustrate” some
point or other which can in principle be stated without recourse to the clumsy vehicle of a narrative. Stories are
often wrongly regarded as a poor person’s substitute for the “real thing”, which is to be found in either some
abstract truth or in statements about “bare facts”.’ (N. T. Wright, \textit{The New Testament and the People of God}
(SPCK 1992)). For further discussion on the role of narrative in an individual and social context see Alasdair
MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: a study in moral theory} (Duckworth 1981), John Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social
Theory: Beyond Secular Reason} (Blackwell 1990) and Paul Ricoeur \textit{Oneself as Another} (University of Chicago
\textsuperscript{3} Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, \textit{The Parting of the Ways} (SCM 1991), especially chapters 3 and 6 and N. T. Wright, \textit{Jesus
and the Victory of God} (SPCK, 1996) chapter 7 and Part III.
\textsuperscript{4} On the role of metaphor in organizations see David Grant and Cliff Oswick (eds), \textit{Metaphor and Organizations}
Theory: Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives} (Oxford University Press 1997)
\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Heikki Räisänen, ‘[Recently] we have become aware in quite a new way of the diversity of the early church
\textsuperscript{6} Ideology has been called ‘the most elusive concept in the whole of social science’ David McLellan, \textit{Ideology}
(Open University Press, 1995 [1987]), p. 1. See David Clines excellent summary of the different uses of the
term in \textit{Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible} (Sheffield Academic Press
\textsuperscript{7} For further discussion of the doctrinal basis see Vaughan S. Roberts, ‘Reframing the UCCF Doctrinal Basis’,
\textsuperscript{8} Robin Gill and Derek Burke, \textit{Strategic Church Leadership} (SPCK 1996).
\textsuperscript{9} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Version of Moral Inquiry} (Duckworth 1990), pp. 230–1

Iain L. Mangham, ‘MacIntyre and the Manager’ in *Organization* Volume 2 (2) 1995, pp. 181–204, p. 196