Christian Witness in Postmodern Scotland: Reflections On The Renewing Of The Local Church For Mission

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INTRODUCTION

Every major branch of the Christian church in the West finds itself at present caught up in an exercise of intense self-analysis and self-searching, driven in part by an urgent quest 'for the kind of change that will enable the Church to do the work of God in a healthy and forthright manner',[1] but also fuelled in part by fear that the church in the Western world may be going the way of the church in Roman North Africa, not so long after Augustine's day. In his illuminating book on the future of Judaism, *Future Tense*, Jonathan Sacks quotes the legendary politician: 'Yesterday we stood at the edge of the abyss, but today we have taken *a giant step forward*.'[2] Christian history, like Jewish history, can sometimes feel like that. It would be easy, in the current situation, for our reflections to take the form of a sustained lament about the state of contemporary society, and even louder lament about the state of the church in Scotland. After all, as William Abraham states, 'the lament and the jeremiad are culturally favoured forms of discourse in the modern Church'. As Abraham says, this approach, while 'understandable… is also self-defeating and unrealistic'. Apart from the fact that 'Much of our lamenting and breast-beating is really an expression of fear and anger at the loss of our position among the cultural elites of the West,' they also reveal 'a lack of realism about all that God has done and is doing in our lives, in the Church, in history, and in creation at large….' Abraham tellingly adds: 'Whatever the case, we cannot gainsay the fact that Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Anyone who shares these convictions cannot entertain any ultimate pessimism about the long-term future of the gospel and the Church.'[3]

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1 W.J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 1.

2 J. Sacks, *Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture* (London: Hodder, 2009), p. 1.

3 Abraham, *Logic of Renewal*, pp. 127-8.

Similarly, the late Colin Gunton encourages us to give to our reflections a more positive orientation: 'Like much of the modern church,' he writes, 'we are in danger of worrying ourselves into extinction because we seem less the players in a great drama of redemption than the last remnants of a great experiment. But that is to mistake our situation.' What is necessary, maintains Gunton, in words first spoken to his own local congregation, where he preached regularly for many years:

> is to realise that what is causing our malaise, our feeling of impotence and failure, is precisely our opportunity. We are apparently left on the sidelines because the modern world has decided to follow other gods than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that decision is destroying it … But that is also our opportunity … We have to begin to organize our church life so that everything we do is ordered to mission. We are the details of God's plan for his world. Every one of those details needs to be in place.[4]

Again, in *Future Tense*, Sacks refers to the well-known fact that the Chinese ideogram for 'crisis' also means 'opportunity'. He notes, however, that 'Hebrew is more hopeful still. The word for "crisis", *mashber*, also means a "childbirth chair".' Sacks comments that 'the Jewish reflex is to see difficult times as birth pangs. Something new is being born.'[5] We may feel encouraged to hope that the difficult times through which the church in Scotland is now passing, may prove to be just that: the birth pangs of new creation life in our country.

Gunton's call to reconfigure everything in the life of the church for mission is echoed by a distinguished voice from our Scottish heritage. At another critical time in the life of the church in Scotland, Dr Thomas Chalmers spoke trenchant words that offer the perspective needed by a church serious about rising to the challenges and opportunities we currently face:

> Who cares about the Free Church compared with the Christian good of Scotland? Who cares about any Church but as an instrument of Christian good? For be assured that the moral and religious well-being of the population is of infinitely higher importance than the advancement of any sect.[6]

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4 C.E.Gunton, *Theology through Preaching. The Gospel and the Christian Life* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2001), pp. 140, 142.

5 Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 55.

6 W.G. Blaikie, *Thomas Chalmers* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1896), p. 142.

Words which, as Peter Neilson rightly says, continue to 'remind us of our calling under God as the Church of Jesus Christ in Scotland—that the grace of God may flow to every nook and cranny of our land for the good of the people through the presence of Christian individuals and communities in every part of the nation's life.'[7] He refers to words adopted by the Church of Scotland's then Board of National Mission, and which its successor body, the Mission and Discipleship Council, was happy to adopt as its own prayer vision:

> That the people of Scotland in all it parts may hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, see the life of his Spirit among his people, and come to know the love of God the Father.[8]

The dominant theme of this paper is the place and significance of the local church within the imperative call to Christian witness and mission within contemporary Scotland. What the late Professor David Wright wrote about evangelism is equally applicable to mission in its more comprehensive reality, namely that, without ignoring Christian outreach in other contexts, 'what will count in the long run will be evangelism grounded in the local church. The congregation renewed for mission is God's primary evangelistic agency.'[9] This holds whether we are thinking about 'inherited' congregations or 'fresh expressions' of local church.[10]

POSTMODERN SCOTLAND

The Scotland that calls urgently for Christian mission today represents a very different society and culture not only from those of Chalmers' day but from what we knew only a few decades ago. The writer recently heard Professor Phil Hanlon, Professor of Public Health at the University of Glasgow, suggest that the 'tectonic' movement is of such a nature as to indicate that we are experiencing in our time not so much the usual relatively minor generational shifts (except that they are happening somewhat faster these days), as something more profound: not so much 'an age of change' as 'a change of age'. Many signs of distress in our society,

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7 P. Neilson, *New Church, New Generation, New Scotland* (Glasgow: Covenanters Press, 2005), p. 16.

8 Ibid.

9 D.F. Wright and A.H. Gray, eds, *Local Church Evangelism. Patterns and Approaches* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1987), p. 10.

10 For a recent and illuminating contribution to discussions about the emerging church movement, see D. Gay, *Remixing the Church. Towards an emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

not least increasingly prevalent obesity, addictive behaviour, depression, and family breakdown, reflect a widespread sense of purposelessness and pessimism regarding the future, arising in no little measure from the 'absence of a sustaining redemptive vision for our society'. It was shocking to learn that 60% of children in the city of Glasgow are being raised by only one parent. Hanlon suggested that reactions to the presence of the enormous forces of change that swirl around us are typically one of three: neurotic—we don't want to know; regressive—we get angry and upset; or transformative.[11] And transformation, it is worth recalling, is what we are about in the church of Christ.

Part of our responsibility as God's people is to appraise any new ethos that shapes the culture in which it is our calling to articulate and embody the Gospel. As the late John Stott taught us, it is our duty to listen to God's world as well as to God's Word. While we must recognize, with Andrew Walker, that 'mission activity should be determined by the content of faith and not the context of culture', since 'too much attention to culture distorts the message, and Christianity becomes not inculturated but domesticated',[12] it remains the case that our faith always required to be properly contextualised. In today's Scotland, which by the later years of the twentieth century had become 'a leading-edge postmodern nation',[13] we have no alternative but to live out our Christian commitment in the midst of a culture, and to bear Christian witness to an emerging generation, in which postmodern ideas, attitudes and values are very widespread.

There is, right away, the difficulty of trying to comprehend contemporary culture. David Smith reminds us of the challenge of a valid contextualisation of the gospel at such a time of change in the culture—a culture

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11 In an address at 'The Shaping of Things to Come' conference, at Gartmore House Conference Centre, Stirling, 20-22 March 2012.

12 A. Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel Mission and Culture* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 6. Writing within the American context (but with a wider relevance), Brueggemann comments on the church's loss of 'power to believe or to act', through its widespread inculturation to 'the … ethos of consumerism', an enculturation caused by 'our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition. Our consumer culture is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope, which means everything must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now.' W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 11.

13 W. Storrar, with reference to the argument of the sociologist David McCrone. W. Storrar, 'A Tale of Two Paradigms: Mission in Scotland from 1946', in *Death or Glory: The Church's Mission in Scotland's Changing Society*, ed. by D. Searle (Fearn/Edinburgh: Mentor/Rutherford House), p. 68.

that can leave us 'bewildered by shifting patterns of family and household living, short-term and part-time unemployment, multi-channel television and multi-screen entertainment, the global media and information highways… seven-day shopping in cathedral-like shopping malls… alternative therapies and new age spiritualities, the rainbow of single issue campaigning groups, and a myriad of other cultural trends.'[14] Little wonder that the struggle to get one's head round contemporary culture has been described as one in which, 'We see through a kaleidoscope darkly.'[15] In the interests of Christian mission, it is important that we do not give up in this endeavour, while reminding ourselves that, in the most fundamental sense, the Gospel does not need to be made relevant. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, its relevance is axiomatic.

'Postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' (sometimes the two are distinguished, sometimes they are used interchangeably) are notoriously slippery terms—perhaps, in Anthony Thistleton's view, 'ultimately undefinable'. Thistleton believes we should take 'postmodern' as referring more to a mood than to a period of history—a mood that is heavily determined by the perceived failings of modernism.[16] Within the diversity that is postmodernism, a number of important and, for our purposes, relevant themes can be traced. The most important, according to McGrath is the 'rejection of modernism's quest for objective, essentially knowable truth and beauty; its belief that a totality and unity can still be found within the frequented world we inhabit, so that the world can be known, understood, and mastered through rational and scientific means'.[17]

Respect for the Other is another major feature of postmodernism. As against the individualism of the modern world, with its focus on the 'autonomous human person', postmodernism inculcates respect and tolerance for differences. As a cultural mood it 'celebrates diversity of belief, seeing any attempt to coerce individuals to accept the viewpoints of another as being oppressive'.[18]

The removal of any controlling 'centre' as offering an ultimate guarantee of meaning, is essential to the postmodern ethos since it leads, in the view of Derrida, 'to a systematic attempt to exclude by ignoring,

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14 See D. Smith, *Crying in the Wilderness: Evangelism and Mission in Today's Culture* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), p. 73.

15 Ibid.

16 A.C. Thistleton, *The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle and his Thought* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 148.

17 A. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2004), p. 225.

18 McGrath, *Twilight of Atheism*, p. 227. McGrath quotes Derrida: 'Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness to the other.'

repressing or marginalizing others'. Such 'decentring' is seen as necessary for the removal of the oppression that forces the periphery to conform to the centre, arising from a refusal to tolerate alternatives, something Derrida sees as characteristic of the way in which western powers have sought to refashion the world, often by the use of violence, in accordance with its own ethnocentric beliefs and practices.[19]

This rejection of a unifying 'centre' to reality leads to a situation in which 'we have no fixed vantage point beyond our own structuring of the world from which to gain a purely objective view of whatever reality might be out there'.[20] It has the effect of removing 'any common standards of appeal in people's efforts to measure, judge, or value, ideas, opinions or life-style choices'. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of a single, all-encompassing world-view. The moderns 'believed that they were building a new society on the foundation of universal rationality alone… Postmoderns contend that we can no longer reasonably hold out the prospect of discovering the one, symbolic universal world that unites humanity at a level deeper than that of our apparent differences.[21]

'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity to metanarratives': so famously wrote the postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard.[22] In other words, not only have all reigning metanarratives come under suspicion, since in Terry Eagleton's words they all alleged have a 'secretly terroristic function', namely 'to ground and legitimate the illusion of a "universal" human history', the very notion of a grand narrative is apparently no longer credible.[23] For our comfort we are left with local narratives, and 'Local and partial insights are to be welcomed and respected, in contrast to the suspicion with which totalizing claims are to be treated.'[24] In the postmodern mood, all belief systems are equally plausible: something is true for you if it is true for you.

Also rejected in postmodernism is the dualistic division of reality into 'mind' and 'matter' on which the Enlightenment project was built, with its consequent view of the human person as 'soul' (thinking substance) and 'body' (physical substance). An emerging generation influenced by postmodern ideas are more interested in the human person as a unified whole.

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19 Ibid., p. 228.

20 S.J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 41.

21 Grenz, *Primer*, pp. 42-3.

22 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

23 See McGrath, *Twilight of Atheism*, p. 248.

24 Ibid., p. 226.

In seeing postmodern as constituting a mood rather than a period, Anthony Thistleton quotes approvingly a comment of Richard Roberts: 'Postmodernity does not exist as an epoch… Pre-modern, modern and postmodern coexist within individual communities and within countries.'[25] Interestingly Thistleton goes on to identify characteristics of postmodernism which he finds deeply reminiscent of the mood in Corinth, with which Paul had to contend: '*pluralism*; multiple value-systems; emphasis upon *rhetoric* rather than truth; concern about *perception* rather than reality; its regard for the *local* and rejection of the universal; and its social construction, rather than its acceptance of what is given.'[26] Thistelton argues that Paul would have been both critical and approving of different aspects of both 'modernity' and 'postmodernity'. In at least three respects he would have been in sympathy with the postmodern mood: while critical of its 'pluriformity' and 'relativism', he would have agreed that 'All human kind is *relational*': that the self cannot 'fully develop without interaction with the community'; secondly, 'like many postmodern writers, he rejects the "myths" of the control of the universe by "powers"', which 'powers', 'including the imperial power of Rome… were the equivalent in the ancient world of "legitimizing" forces with grand narratives'; and thirdly, with regard to the Other, 'Paul no longer felt "anger, alienation, anxiety," or "racism and sexism," when he urged that in the Church, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28).'[27]

Doubtless, in the highly diverse contexts in which we seek to bear Christian witness in Scotland today, all three moods or mindsets—premodern, modern and postmodern—can be found and require to be addressed in ways correspondingly appropriate. The postmodern mood, however, remains pervasive, and in this situation we must retain confidence that the Gospel which turned the first century world upside down, is well able do the same in postmodern Scotland. As Tom Wright has said:

> Paul's view of truth, of reality, of the self, of the controlling story of the Creator and the cosmos, of the covenant God and his covenant people—these can serve very well as the true and vital answer to post-modernity's attempt to deconstruct truth and reality, to destabilize and decentre the self, and to

[25] Thistleton, *The Living Paul*, p. 149. The quotation is from R. Roberts, 'A Postmodern Church?', in *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W. Hardy*, ed. by D.F. Ford and D.L. Stamps (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), p. 182.

[26] Thistleton, *The Living Paul*, p. 149.

[27] Ibid., p. 150.

> destroy all metanarratives. I believe, in other words, that Paul's Gospel… has the power to do for the world and the church of today what they did in Paul's own day.[28]

POST-CHRISTENDOM SCOTLAND

Of course, it is not only in a postmodern but in a post-Christendom Scotland, that Christian witness today must take place. The advantages of Christendom for the church were many, not least in the provision of a common moral discourse. The disadvantages, however, were considerable. The French scholar Jacques Ellul went so far as to say, 'Christendom astutely abolished Christianity by making us all Christians.' Christianity, he argues, ceased to be 'an explosive ferment calling everything into question in the name of the truth that is in Jesus Christ' and became instead 'the structural ideology of this particular society.'[29] As David Smith comments, 'The Christ who came to be the Lord and Saviour of every human culture was co-opted by one particular civilisation and was thus reduced to the role of the guarantor of its values.'[30] Smith recalls the way in which the late Francis Schaeffer recognized in the pain and loss of privilege now faced by the Western church, 'a door to the discovery of a new hope and a fresh vision for the future', in which would be found 'a recovery of the apostolic understanding of the church and its mission, in which the authentic mark of Christians—mutual love—would again become central to Christian identity.'[31]

In similar vein, Brueggemann believes the church in the West is called to face the numbing reality of her loss of status: 'The task of prophetic imagination is to cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception, so that 'the God of endings is confessed as Lord.'[32] Brueggemann expressed his conviction that 'the churches of the West can move through a time of great change with relief and gratitude that we are not summoned

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28 N.T. Wright, *What St Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1997), p. 165.

29 J. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 39.

30 D. Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), p. 40.

31 Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, p. 42. See F. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1970).

32 W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 49.

to be an echo of culture, either to administer its economics, to embrace its psychology, or to certify its morality. To us is gifted an alternative way.'[33]

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY

To find an authentic model for this 'alternative way', we are compelled to give renewed consideration to the position of the early church, as it made its way within the then Roman Empire. Regarding its message, 'Christian mission made sense only on the premise that the crucified Jesus had been enthroned as the true Lord of the whole world, and thus claiming the allegiance of the whole world.' Had the new Christian movement taken its place as 'simply another private cultus among the myriad that the empire boasted,' it would 'have been accorded a ready welcome.' The early Christians had to refuse the offer: 'For them Jesus was not a deified man, like the emperors the senate decreed to be divine; nor was he a mythical hero like Hercules. His labours had been real: the humiliating agony of a cross in the reign of Tiberias.'[34]

Equally subversive within the Roman Empire was the lifestyle which the message produced. The Christians behaved 'as a new social grouping in the ancient world…

> as a new social grouping in the ancient world … They believed themselves to be a "third race", neither Jewish nor Gentile but drawing men and women from both … The gospel constituted a new category of human being, a new way of being human. Their primary identity was found in a new familial community whose social inclusiveness was unparalleled. Despite their marginal social status, their vision embraced the whole empire and beyond. They believed they were the means by which God was bringing to fulfilment the Jewish hope of a global peace, while they themselves were *paroikoi* (1 Peter 2:11)—resident aliens—at home everywhere, but settled nowhere.' [35]

These early Christians believed that 'all cultures in their distinctiveness could serve the one God's unfolding purpose for human life… No cultures were inherently unclean, and none was absolutized in its particularity.' Linguistic and other cultural resources were 'rummaged for tools through which the message of Jesus could be conveyed'.[36]

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[33] W. Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), pp. 105-7; quoted in Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, p. 42.

[34] V. Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p. 226.

[35] Ramachandra, *Recovery of Mission*, p. 226.

[36] Ibid., pp. 226-7.

All of this constitutes a great challenge and encouragement to the contemporary church. As Newbigin argues, the gospel of the risen Christ offers the world a whole new starting point for human thought and action. The lordship of Jesus 'means that he is Lord not only of the Church but of the world, not only in the religious life but in all life, not merely over some peoples but over all peoples. He is not just my saviour, but the saviour of the world.'[37] What the church of Christ has to offer, humbly but boldly, to the society and culture of postmodern Scotland is nothing less than her salvation.

A METANARRATIVE TO TRUMP ALL METANARRATIVES

Darrell Guder has reminded us of Hans Küng's contention that the church's origins are in the Gospel—'the good news told in the New Testament, news that is continually spawning the church in every time and place.' What makes the church the *church* is that, for all the inevitable diversity of its forms across time and space, 'its life is birthed by the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit gives meaning and response to the gospel'.[38] The church is therefore 'an eschatological community of salvation', and, as such, it 'comes from the preaching of the reign of God—the reign of God is its beginning and its foundation. And it moves towards the revealed consummation of the reign of God—the reign of God is its goal, its limitation, its judgement.'[39]

Do we urgently need as Scottish Christians to give to the gospel a fresh hearing as 'an effort to get back to roots in order to be clearer about the essence of what it means to be the church'[40]—to be the church of Christ in Scotland and for Scotland at this time? To do so is to (re) discover the central significance of mission for such an understanding.

Arguably, not the least of our difficulties in addressing the challenges of mission in Scotland today is the seriously defective ecclesiology many of us have inherited—an ecclesiology formulated within a Christendom context, and which, partly on that account, had almost nothing to say about mission.

In his important book, *The Mission of God*, Chris Wright, as others of course have done, shows clearly that from first to last the biblical story is 'all about mission'—the mission of God himself (*missio Dei*) to save

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37 L. Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: the Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 38-9.

38 D. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 86.

39 H. Küng, *The Church* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1968), pp. 81, 95.

40 Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 86.

lost humanity, and to put to rights through Jesus Christ all that has gone wrong in the world he created in love, and to which he remains passionately committed.[41] The gospel is Jesus himself in his life, death and resurrection, 'as the action of God that both reveals God's passion for the world and achieves God's purpose for the world'.[42] The church is defined by its origins in a gospel that is centred deeply in the announcement that the reign of God is at hand. The Good News of the Kingdom which he proclaimed and which he sent out his disciples to proclaim was also to be central in the future mission of the whole church: 'And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come' (Matt. 24:14).

The good news to which we are called to bear witness in today's postmodern Scotland is a message that is radically orientated towards a great future hope. The creation that came perfect from God's hand, and was subsequently corrupted and disfigured by sin and death, is to be fully and finally reconciled to God—a reconciliation accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The prophetic anticipation of God's future for the world, summed up in the one word *shalom*, envisages 'the full prosperity of a people of God living under the covenant of God's demanding care and compassionate rule.'[43] Such *shalom* comes hand in hand with justice, for 'without justice there can be no real peace, and without peace no real justice. Indeed only in a social world full of a peace grounded in justice can there come the full expression of joy and celebration.'[44] The sin which has corrupted all four dimensions of human life and experience—the spiritual, the rational, the physical and the social—is fully dealt with, and God's reconciled and healed people, from every tribe, people, nation and language, will sing God's praise in the now fully reconciled and healed new creation.

This great theocentric story is the metanarrative in which the people of Scotland, as people everywhere, can and need to find new meaning and hope. The Big Story that stretches from creation to new creation, that takes account of absolutely everything in between, that is radically subversive of all human power games, relativizing all our places in the great divine scheme of things. It is the story postmodern Scotland is waiting to hear: the Story that makes ultimate sense of the realities of contemporary life, telling us 'where we have come from, how we got to be here, who

41 C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006).

42 Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 87.

43 Ibid., p. 91.

44 Ibid.

we are, why the world is in the mess it is, how it can be (and has been) changed, and where we are ultimately going'. By placing the mission of God at the very centre of all existence, not only does it offer, as Wright says, 'a healthy corrective to the egocentric obsession of much Western culture—including sadly even Western Christian culture',[45] it provides the needed key to unlock the prison of postmodern society's hopelessness and despair.

And as, in terms of the biblical story, 'Christ crucified and risen is the key to all of history, for he is the one who accomplished the mission of God for all creation,' it is the *crucified* Jesus who must be seen to subvert all postmodern opposition to this unique Grand Narrative, as it was 'the risen Jesus … who opened the eyes of the disciples to understand the scriptures by reading them in the double light of his own identity as the Messiah and of their ongoing mission to all nations in the power of the Spirit. "This is what is written, … and you will be my witnesses… to the ends of the earth"'.[46]

'THE ONLY GOSPEL HERMENEUTIC'

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.'[47] He questioned 'whether the civilization calling itself "Christian" had ever seriously attempted to live the vision bequeathed to us by the New Testament.' This kind of generalisation brings home to us, as Douglas John Hall expresses it, 'the fact that the way of Jesus Christ… always exceeds our actual performance as Christians… In a real sense the way of Jesus Christ is always still waiting to be tried. *Christendom*… is ending; *Christianity* once more waits to be tried.'[48] Hall affirms that the difficulty we face as twenty-first century Western Christians is, that 'unless we are able, as Christians, to discover ways of conducting our life and our mission that differ radically from the Christendom form of the church that has dominated throughout most of Christian history, we shall be doomed in the future to be part of the world's problem and not its solution.'[49]

A central challenge here is to reflect on the relationship between the church and the coming kingdom of God. If in Christendom the church was regularly equated with the reign of God, in Scripture *ecclesia* and

45 Wright, *Mission of God*, p. 533.

46 Ibid., p. 534-5.

47 G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Cassel, 1910), p. 22.

48 D.J. Hall, 'Finding Our Way into the Future', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 27/ 2 n.s. (2006) , p. 122.

49 Ibid., p. 123.

basileia are quite separate concepts, although 'the two are intimately bound together'.[50] God's reign is pure gift, and therefore 'The call to receive warms against the consequence of rejecting the gift . The invitation to enter casts a shadow on hesitation at the door.'[51] The issues of repentance and faith are involved here: 'Receiving and entering are actions that mark a turning from other hopes and loyalties that we may accumulate, to a singular hope in the one true God.'[52] To enter the kingdom is 'to turn to God from idols,' (1 Thess. 1:9) abandoning sinful rejection of his rule.

Postmodern Scotland needs to see that sin is idolatry, and that idolatry is the constructing of our deepest identity in relation to any other god, whether Mammon, Gaia, Aphrodite, or the generalised plurality of the gods of our time, including that ideological nationalism, and that idolatry is destructive and de-humanising. Nothing is more ultimate and final than this: *Iēsous Kurios*—Jesus is Lord. And authentic humanness—the kind for which the times cry out—is grown as we form our individual and corporate identity under, and in relation to, his sovereign, gentle, liberating reign. Such an affirmation, of course, is as profoundly countercultural as it was in the Roman Empire of the first century.

By viewing the church as 'constituted by those who are entering and receiving the reign of God, … and where the children of the reign corporately manifest the presence and characteristic features of God's reign', Guder argues that a much 'more dynamic sense of the church's identity and mission in the world' is found.[53] For one thing, it directs us to a more humble starting point for mission, since 'the first mission is always the internal mission: the church evangelized by the Holy Spirit again and again in the echoing word of Jesus inviting us to receive the reign of God and to enter it';[54] and, for another, we have here a 'far more welcoming framework for evangelism. Evangelism would move from an act of recruiting or co-opting those outside the church, to an invitation to companionship.'[55]

This emphasis on humility and companionship is of great importance for our witness to the gospel at this time. Particularly when many

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50 Guder, *Missional Church*, pp. 97-8.

51 Ibid., p. 96.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 99.

54 Ibid., p. 96. Arguably, renewed attention needs urgently to be given in the church to the whole subject of spiritual revival. For a helpful recent discussion of biblical criteria by which revival may be defined and assessed, see N. Scotland, 'Towards a Biblical Understanding and Assessment of Revival', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 85/ 2 (2013), 121-34.

55 Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 97.

voices remind us of 'how problematic are human claims to knowledge', and 'in a culture that increasingly resists and resents anyone who seeks the conversion of another, we must,' argues John Stackhouse, 'commend our faith in a new mode: with a different voice and in a different posture.' We must do it with humility, for several reasons, but chiefly because God himself comes to us in humility, seeking our love and drawing us to him.[56] As Douglas John Hall reminds us, 'there are ways of expressing Christian faith and discipleship that do not falsely offend and humiliate other people or substitute a quest for power for a quest for truth, justice, peace and love.' Most of these ways 'may be called the *befriending* of the world—the compassionate caring for human and other creatures and processes that is signified by the foundational category of Christian ethics, *agape*—suffering love.' When 'such work is done, such compassion shown, such justice undertaken, it will raise in some people—in enough people—the question, "Why?"'. For, as Hall rightly says, 'to express real hope in concrete ways in our overtly and covertly despairing world is to invite that question. Genuine hope—hope in word and deed—does not explain itself. As the first epistle of Peter says, true hope begs an accounting for.'[57]

Christian witness in Scotland urgently requires the renewal of churches in all our communities in such a way that the hope we represent simply begs such an accounting for. The hope-filled gospel of the resurrection makes sense to those looking in from outside only when it is genuinely embodied in an actual community of Christian people in a particular place. 'How is it possible,' asks Lesslie Newbigin, 'that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.'[58]

It is striking how little is said in the New Testament about what we would normally refer to as 'evangelism'. The reality of course is not lacking, but it is not a major emphasis. As Guder points out, the 'New Testament writings were addressed to communities already in mission; the

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[56] J. G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 227.

[57] Hall, 'Finding Our Way', p. 136.

[58] L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 227. Friedrich Nietzsche famously wrote: 'They would need to sing better songs for me to have faith in their Redeemer; and his disciples would have to look more redeemed.' ('On Priests', *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II.xxvi.)

purpose of the canonical Scriptures was (and is) to enable them to continue that mission.'[59]

In Ephesians, for example, the verb *euangelizomai* is entirely lacking. What we have rather, in very general terms, is a wonderful portrayal of the over-arching purpose of God from creation to new creation, and a call to live as people of the new creation—God's kingdom people—whose corporate life, grounded in love, will bear powerful witness to the truth of the gospel. A church where each individual is cherished, where the priesthood of all believers is a practised reality, and the gifts of all are deployed; and so a place where 'the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone… make the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity, a communion in which personhood and sociality are equiprimal.'[60] The reality of that cannot go unnoticed, and such churches become what churches are meant to be: 'places where people can begin to understand and feel and experience what life is like under God's rule, what a community might look like that really lived in Jesus' kingdom'.[61]

It seems fair to say that 'the issue that the churches must face up to… is not so much that people do not believe in God, but that they do not find the churches credible'.[62] Or, as Tomlin states, 'unless there is something about church, or Christians, or Christian faith that intrigues, provokes or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of 'reality' then all our 'truth' will count for nothing.'[63]

In other words, a church renewed for mission in and to postmodern Scotland would be the kind of church prepared to witness

> that its members like others hunger for the hope that there is a God who reigns in love and intends the good of the whole earth. The community of the church would testify that they have heard the announcement that such a reign is coming, and indeed is already breaking into the world. They would confirm that they have heard the open welcome and received it daily, and they would invite others to join them as those who also have been extended God's welcome. To those invited the church would offer itself to assist their entrance

59 Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 223.

60 M. Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 213.

61 G. Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, 3rd edn (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 60.

62 N. McCulloch, *A Gospel to Proclaim* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), p. 84.

63 Tomlin, *Provocative Church*, p. 10.

> into the reign of God and to travel with them as co-pilgrims. Here lies a path for the renewal of the heart of the church and its evangelism.[64]

Examples of such churches, taking many different forms, are to be found increasingly all over Scotland. Seeds of fresh hope may be discovered in many places.[65]

A 'SPIRITUAL' PEOPLE

One final point. It would be a huge mistake to imagine that contemporary Scotland has lost interest in matters of the spirit. There is clear evidence of a massive spiritual movement in Scotland that has nothing to do with the institutional church. Much of it has nothing to do (yet) with Christianity either. In recent years, books on *atheist* spirituality have appeared on the shelves of our bookshops and are selling in large numbers.[66] We should not really be surprised, for the evidence is massive that religion is the default position of the human spirit. There is a short journey from the premodern Augustine's, 'Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee,' to the postmodern Douglas Coupland's *Life after God*, where he confesses:

> Now—here is my secret:
>
> I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.[67]

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64 Guder, *Missional Church*, p. 97.

65 A valuable resource for churches concerned to engage with postmodern Scotland is found in various online articles by Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York. Keller has a deep understanding of, and has enjoyed remarkably successful engagement with, a cultural context with many correspondences to our own. Insightful articles on mission can be accessed at <http://j.mp/KellerGC> [last accessed 20 May 2013].

66 Two highly popular examples are: André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* (London: Bantam Press, 2008), and Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012).

67 D. Coupland, *Life after God* (London: Touchstone Books, 1994), p. 359.

David Smith comments that 'the problem for the Christian mission in the postmodern West is not the absence of spiritual hunger within the postmodern generation, but rather the church's failure to recognize the existence and significance of this quest on the part of thousands of people beyond its doors.'[68]

Possibly the greatest challenge and opportunity before a renewed and missionary church in Scotland, as representatives of Christ's sovereign reign and grace, is to engage with this huge movement of spirituality in such a way as to redirect a spiritually hungry, yet distressed and despairing generation, to the One who fulfils all the longings of the human heart; to welcome them unreservedly into his loving gentle reign; and to walk together with them as fellow pilgrims who are nourished by a hope too wonderful to take in; and in that journey together, rejoicing in the constant companionship of the unseen Christ, whose promise to his church for every day of its present sojourn, through all the changing days and aeons is: 'Lo I am with you always, even till the end of the age' (Matt. 28: 20).

At this time, many feel threatened by the apparently accelerating pace of change in which we find ourselves caught up. It is tempting to look to the future, and to the future of the church in Scotland, with dark foreboding. Yet as Kierkegaard saw clearly, 'the future is not utterly new, because there is nothing new under the sun.'69 The Christian's and the church's task, he recognized, is to struggle with the future in prayer, knowing that to do so is to exercise a believing expectancy that cannot be disappointed. Because the mission we are concerned about is ultimately *missio Dei*, prayer must become central in all our work. In preparing for the future we may well pay heed to the Dane's wise words:

> When the sailor is out on the ocean, when everything is changing all around him, when the waves are born and die, he does not stare down at the waves, because they are changing. He looks at the stars. Why? Because they are faithful; they have the same location now that they had for our ancestors and will have for generations to come.[70]

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68 Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, p. 73.

69 S. Kierkegaard, 'The Expectancy of Faith', in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* V (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 18.

70 Ibid., p.19.