

The kingdom made visible: a missional theology of church

Christians face a complex world. Postmodernity delivers with one hand a celebration of diversity and, with the other, an anxiety over belonging and a quest for roots. The inescapable facts of globalisation pull in yet different directions. If the church is to thrive in such a milieu it will need to have its own sense of identity clear. As Christians have felt increasingly pressured in the religious marketplace, we have turned more and more to examination of ourselves. What is it which divides us, what is it which unites us? The ecumenical movement of the twentieth century was one manifestation of this, as was Vatican II. In the evangelical world the appearance of such publications as Darell L. Guder's provocative *Missional Church* in 1998 was a sign that a new look at the nature and role of the church under way.¹ Among evangelical theologians fresh impetus has been given to this effort by such as Kevin Vanhoozer and George Vandervelde.²

It is, of course, encouraging that there should be serious efforts to engage with the nature of church. However, as the old maps warned, dangers may lurk here. Past experience suggests that it has been ecclesiological issues which have most powerfully divided us. Indeed it is pretty clear that (historically, at least) most Christians have agreed on most of the core doctrines. There have been plenty of arguments over details, but rarely are these enough to cause division. Much more threatening to unity have been conflicts over authority and the nature and structure of the church.

Even when other doctrines are involved, ecclesiology can play a fundamental role. This is well illustrated in the eleventh-century split between East and West, the so-

called "great schism". The standard short explanation is that the Orthodox and Roman churches divided over a pneumatological point – the famous *filioque* phrase inserted in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed of 381. This phrase, the exact origin of which is unclear, suggested that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. The East, with its emphasis on a social trinity and the personhood of each of the three, did not wish to be associated with the western view, heavily influenced by Augustine's more modalistic vision. Yet this is not close to the full story. The Eastern churches objected most fundamentally not to the apparent relegation of the Spirit (although they certainly did not like it) but rather to the insertion of the additional clause by the Roman church without the calling of a full ecumenical council. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed had been agreed in the preferred fashion and, as far as the East was concerned, it should not be altered by either a regional meeting or by papal fiat. The western promulgation of the amended creed was seen to be an unwarranted assertion of authority. As Jaroslav Pelikan points out,

*The Filioque had arisen as a liturgical question, and the propriety of the formula as an addition to the text of the Nicene Creed was...the occasion for dispute. Even if the Filioque was acceptable theologically, it would have been illegitimate liturgically and legally.*³

The Schism of 1054 was at its base ecclesiological. Who has the power? Who is in charge? Who makes decisions? Any cool look at the reformation and at subsequent divisions within Protestantism will recognise a similar story. It was therefore no aberration that church

union efforts in New Zealand in the 1960s stumbled over questions of structure and authority. That which divides us institutionally is principally ecclesiological.

This might be seen as a rather bleak picture. Were Nietzsche and his postmodern descendants right to identify power as the greatest force, by which all claims to truth are compromised? If we are looking for success in mission might it not be better to avoid ecclesiological questions altogether? Might not the various denominations best find common ground to work together if no-one mentions the "E" word! In this essay I suggest that the risks and dangers must be more than acknowledged – indeed, they may be embraced. For the church to fulfil its part in God's mission it must understand itself, and for this to happen ecclesiology must be pursued and pursued vigorously. Theology has failed if it meekly rolls over to Nietzschean assertions that its truth claims are merely another example of the "will to power" in operation. Disputes over the nature and structure of the church have unquestionably dogged our history, but only because they bring us face to face with important matters. It is in such things that the church as body of Christ becomes incarnate. When real decisions must be made, when real people and places are affected, when flesh, blood, budgets and building materials are involved; these are the exact moments when the church reveals itself, when ecclesiology matters. Indeed, I will argue that, far from something to be avoided because of its risks, ecclesiology brings us to the heart of the Gospel, to what it truly means to be "missional church".

Mission, in turn, provides the key to an authentic ecclesiology.

However we must be careful as to where we begin. An ecclesiology which is primarily driven by the need to attract non-believers is doomed to fail. The church which shapes itself to the world in this way would properly be open to Nietzschean accusations of power seeking. Neither will it be possible to rebuild our sense of ourselves from reigning philosophical, sociological, or business models. We have been too ready to accept the analyses of others in our efforts to reinvent ourselves. As John Milbank suggests,

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol....⁴

An approach to the church crippled with such misguided modesty can only exacerbate the problems we face. We must look to a deeper impulse, at the kernel of the gospel, the *missio Dei*, the very mission of God.

What I will attempt to outline in the remainder of this essay is a missional theology of church. It will reflect three interlocking principles. Firstly, we must rigorously submit ourselves to what God has revealed. What the apostle Paul describes as “the secret once hidden”⁵ has been shown to us in Jesus Christ. Only by honest and thorough attention to the relevant scriptures can we begin to grasp our calling. Our biblical theology must be prior and thorough.

Secondly, whatever we are called to is part of the plan of God. The church’s mission only makes sense as an expression of the divine mission. Determining these links and implications is a synthetic, systematic task.

Thirdly, the “why” and the “how” of mission are not separate commodities. They must be held in the one hand. Our understanding of why we engage in mission will direct our choices of the means – and, in turn, actual engagement in

mission brings a critique and refinement to our theology. Thus, practical theology is a key complement in the ecclesiological movement.

I have organised the remainder of the essay around these interwoven themes, leading naturally to a threefold division:

1. Foundations
2. Understanding
3. Demonstration

1. Biblical foundations

For most of us, the scriptural ignition point for mission is Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:18-20. The command to “Go” has enormous resonance among mission minded Christians. Activists by nature, we are drawn to clear instructions. “Tell us what to do Lord, and we will do it.” This faithful response is vital, it must never be lost. But Matthew 28 is not, and can never be, enough to sustain mission. We must take the Spirit seriously on this – if the Great Commission were all we needed to understand our calling we must wonder why we have been given so much else.

And we have been given so much else! Behind what we are called to individually, as congregations, or denominations, lies a vision of the cosmic plan of God – “the secret once hidden” – to which our activism must be faithful. This *missio Dei* of course imbues the whole of Scripture, but it is particularly expressed in a series of New Testament passages which locate Christ, creation, the church and the future in a grand design which goes to the very heart of God. We obviously have not have the space to explore in detail all of the principal passages. We will concentrate on two – in Romans 8 and Ephesians 3 – but it is nonetheless important to note the range and number of these passages and, in precis, some of the themes which they reveal.

John 1:1-18: The word, rooted in the divine life, creator of all things, bestowed the power to become children of God, becoming flesh and bringing grace.

Philippians 2:5-11: The divine

Christ steps beyond divinity, takes human form and experiences death. For this reason he is exalted to the glory of God the Father.

Ephesians 1:3-23: God chose us [the church] in Christ before creation, to be his children through Christ. Not only that he has revealed to us his plan (again, *in Christ*) to gather all creation *in Christ*. Because we are God’s children in this way, we have an inheritance in Christ, so that we might live for the praise of his glory, Moreover, our inheritance is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. Christ is head of all things, for the church, which is his body, and “fullness”.

Colossians 1:15-28: Christ is the image of God. All things were created in him and are held together in him. Through Christ, God reconciles all things to himself by making peace through the blood of the cross. Paul understands his own ministry as continuing Christ’s suffering, for the sake of the church to which the mystery of God is revealed.

2 Peter 1:3-4: God promises and enables us to escape the corruption of this world and share in the divine nature.

Revelation 21:1-7: In an vision of a new order, God creates a new heaven and a new earth, so that he may dwell with his people. There is no more death or pain. Those who conquer inherit these things as children of God

From these and other passages, a broad picture emerges of a plan of God, a divine “mission” – an eternal mission, from before the dawn of time. Before there was creation God had the end in mind. That end is variously described. In Ephesians 1 it is “to gather up all things in Christ”, in Revelation 21 it is to bring heaven and earth together, to make his home among mortals. It is a picture of the complete reconciliation of the universe with its creator. Crucially, this plan is to be brought about *in Christ*. Over and over, there is the stating and restating of the movement of the eternal Son. The Son comes to earth as the God/man, Jesus Christ. That

entire event – incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension – is the pivot point of the plan, “ground zero” for the cosmic mission of God, enacted and fulfilled in Christ. When Jesus prayed “your kingdom come” this is what he referred to. It is a breathtaking vision and there are clearly rich christological and eschatological implications. Our focus in this essay, though, is narrower, specifically: what is our place in this picture? Where does the mission of the church fit in the mission of God?

There can be no doubt that the church is integral to the plan. There is an old chestnut which goes “Jesus came preaching the Kingdom; what he got was the church” – the implication being that Jesus didn’t get what he expected and had to settle for second best. It is a lie. The passages we have briefly touched on already hint at another, more startling truth. To the church is uniquely revealed what once was hidden. The “secret” is no secret anymore. Essential to that secret is the discovery that believers have been chosen, before the world began (Eph 1:4) for “adoption”. More specifically, those who believe, those who have the Spirit, those who have received Christ, are “children of God”. More pointedly still, they are “heirs of the Father”, “joint heirs with the Son”. But this change of status, immense as it is, does not, of itself, focus our enquiry. There is more – a central, active role for the church in the movement of God’s cosmic plan. We find it outlined most fully in Romans 8 and Ephesians 3 – passages which we need to examine in more detail.

Romans 8:14-25:

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified

with him.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (NRSV)

Here, yet again, the stress is on the Christians’ adoption. They are “children of God”, “heirs of God”, “joint heirs with Christ”. Crucially, we also suffer with Christ, so that, in Paul’s phrase, they may be “glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). This phrase is interesting. What can it mean? What is it for Christians to be “glorified with him”? Having in a number of places laid out the cosmic role of Christ, Paul goes on to explore the cosmic significance of the church. This is outlined in v 19. Creation waits for the revealing of the children of God, because God intends creation to attain the freedom already gained by the children of God.

Here is something truly significant. To be “children of God” is important not just for humanity, but for the universe. As “children”, Christians have been fully reconciled to God – once we were estranged, we are now family – “joint heirs”. But this is not the end, rather it is just a further instalment of the unfolding plan of God. In the next phase the children of God declare, in the very fact of their new status, the coming redemption of the universe. The church is thus the test case, the example, the first fruit

of what is to come. To be sure, in our time, as Paul acknowledges, we wait and groan to see the new thing. But it is already an eternal reality – in Christ it has been achieved. This unseen reality is the basis of our hope and a fundamental element of a missional ecclesiology.

In Ephesians 3:1-21 Paul makes this cosmic vision more personal.

1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. 13 I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory. 14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being

with power through his Spirit,¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

Amen. (NRSV)

This is a startling passage in many ways. It rewards serious contemplation. What is Paul saying? The mystery of Christ (that is: that Gentiles are fellow heirs) is now revealed to apostles and prophets. Paul is a servant of this gospel, so that through him (Paul) all people may see the plan and then, in turn, that through the church the wisdom of God may be made known to the universe. Here again is the cosmic mission of the church. To advance this cause Paul prays three things for the Ephesians. These three are integral to that mission just declared.

1. strength through the power of the Spirit;
2. that Christ will dwell in their hearts as they are grounded in love; and
3. to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge and all this so that they may be filled with the fullness of God.

And, finally (v 21), there is a fascinating benediction, “to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations.”

Again we are presented with the unexpected, the staggering, role of the church. Paul declares here that God may be glorified in the church, in a way which parallels the way Christ himself glorifies God. This “glorification” is a key concept and we will return to it.

2. Understanding

How, then, are we to understand all

this? Theology is a measure of our ways of talking about our faith and the task of systematic theology is to make the right connections so that our portrayal of God and his plan for the universe is authentic. These foundational New Testament passages on the mission of God and the role of his children are part of a bigger picture still. They connect directly to the distinctive Christian understandings of the nature of God, the coming of Christ and the end of time.

In this section we will explore the links between the Trinity, the incarnation, eschatology, the church and mission. When thought out in the context of passages such as we have noted, a dynamic picture emerges of the saving love of God.

At the centre of the Christian understanding of God is the life of the Trinity. God exists, not as some remote lonely figure but as a community of love – Father, Son and Spirit. Three, whose connection to one another is so perfect, so complete, that they are properly called “one”. That relationship was so perfect that it did not require anything else. God could have existed in eternity, with no creation to complicate the picture. However, whilst Christians do not accept that God had to create, that God needed the world or was forced into making it, we may nonetheless declare that creation was inevitable. Not that it was something imposed on God, but that the creative act sprang from the very heart of the Trinity itself.

The love of God is a giving love, *agape* love, not selfish in any sense. With such a love perfectly in operation, creation is neither surprising nor inexplicable. Put in simple form: this was a love too good not to share. So God created the universe – not merely as an object “out there”, nor as a plaything; but as a further focus of divine love. The plan of God, the “end” in mind, was a universe wholly in harmony with himself. Though disrupted by the fall, this plan did not alter. This is the vision of “all things coming under Christ” (Eph 1:20), of God “reconciling to

himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:20).

The aim then, the eternal plan, the mission of God, is for a created order in harmony with himself. This is natural, it reflects exactly the life of the Trinity, the very nature of God. As the three persons subsist together in perfect harmony, so it is planned that the created order too will ultimately exist in such harmony with God. Now, of course, at least when viewed from our perspective, this harmony is not yet achieved. The world seems fractured, out of kilter with God. We have located the cause for this in humanity’s rebellion from God. We call this rebellion “sin”. Its product is separation from God, or “death”.

“Sin and death” – these together constitute a “problem” to be overcome. So, with that ultimate goal of perfect harmony always clear, God sets about solving the “problem”. Crucially, everything about that solution is natural. It reflects the nature of God, the nature of the problem and the nature of the ultimate goal. Of God’s saving plan we may say the following.

a) God’s action is a trinitarian movement. (Jn 3:16 “God so loved... that he sent his son.”)

The Son, through whom creation came to be, is the one sent to be with creation. This is the incarnation. The Son becomes human – fully divine, fully human. This is not some marriage merely of convenience. The Son becomes human because it was through humans that the problem arose. But more than that:

b) In Christ the mission is fulfilled.

The very act of incarnation is a triumphant demonstration of the ultimate goal. God’s plan for the universe is that it will be in perfect harmony with himself. In Christ that plan is seen fulfilled – in miniature, perhaps, but the perfect demonstration of what God intends; divine and human, in one person. This is the plan for the end of time enacted *in* time. As the New Testament, especially the writer to the Hebrews, makes clear, this

process of becoming one of us includes suffering. The cross is a true pivot in history. There is so much built into that event – penal substitution, ransom, example, victory – but a part at least is this: that the incarnation of the Son was completed in that moment. The Son was “perfected” in suffering (Heb 2:10). On Calvary he shared even our ultimate limitation – death itself. Christ is the initiative of God, solving the problem – or, better, beginning the unfolding of a new reality. Jesus came declaring the kingdom of God, God’s reign, the fulfilment of God’s mission. And the mission includes us.

c) The church is a part of the plan.

When we recall what Paul says about continuing the suffering of Christ, about Christians being children of God, joint heirs with the Son, about how the church is the body and “fullness” of Christ and about how the creation looks for the revealing of the children of God, we see the true magnitude of what God has done in Christ and is doing through the church.

In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, Christians have been reconciled to God. Thus, in us, too, the plan for the end of time is now mysteriously fulfilled. The church plays an integral part in the unfolding plan of God. We are imperfect to be sure. We may still groan and wait for adoption to become evident in our midst but, for all that, we are the body of Christ – declaring God’s new order to the universe. This is what is signalled in that benediction in Ephesians 3:21. Amazingly, God may be glorified in the *church* as well as Christ. The concept of “glorifying” God here is a rich one. The Greek *doxa*, when applied to God in the New Testament transcends the simple notion of praising God. It is determined by the very divine nature. Christians do not merely offer praise, they participate in God’s glory as they participate in Christ. Conversely, in manifesting the fulfilment of the *missio Dei*, the church glorifies God, displaying to the universe who God is and what

God has done, demonstrating by its very existence the divine nature.

This is our role in the mission of God. This is the cosmic dynamic that we call non-believers to join. As the incarnation of the *missio Dei*, church does not merely do mission, it embodies it.

3. Demonstration

But if that is our part, our role, just how is the role to be played out? The provocative arguments of such publications as *Missional Church* are evidence that hard thinking is being done about strategy and presentation. There is a constant challenge before us, never to lose our edge in evangelism. The details of our practice will evolve with each generation and context. All of us will need to be open to change, both incremental and profound. Yet we must not be tempted into mere pragmatism. The church has no place finding its inspiration in, for instance, the business schools if it has not first sought guidance in its own identity. As Graig Van Gelder puts it, “the church does what it is”.⁶ The witness in scripture about the nature of mission and church has overwhelming implications for the shape and practice of the truly missional church.

Here the church’s relationship with the kingdom of heaven needs to be renovated. In his influential work on New Testament theology George Eldon Ladd drew a clear division between the two. The kingdom is the rule of God. It creates the church and can work through the church, but the two are not to be identified.⁷ I suggest that Ladd’s analysis makes too strong a distinction. The kingdom must not be limited to an essentially ethical vision of the reign of Christ. The vision of the kingdom incorporates the entire sweep of the eschatological plan of God which we have glimpsed above. Crucially, it is unhelpful to separate Jesus’ message of the kingdom from Paul’s eschatological theology. Moreover, when both are understood in the larger concept of the *missio Dei*, it is clear that the church is organically linked with

the coming reign of God. It is not enough to talk of the church merely as herald of the kingdom; the church embodies the kingdom. It provides in its very life and being a glimpse of that new heaven and new earth. Early in the twentieth century, the English theologian P.T. Forsyth put the relationship between the two in this way,

*The church is not a means to the Kingdom, but the Kingdom in the making. It is the new relation, the kingship in so far as that has become a distinct society. It is the family hearth or focus of the children of God.*⁸

More recently, Stanley Grenz put similar ideas in sharp focus.

*God’s kingdom is eschatological. It marks the goal of God’s work in history, the fullness of which lies in the yet unconsummated future. This future – the eschatological reality – and not the past or even the present constitutes our corporate life, just as it determines our individual identity. What the church is, in short, is determined by what the church is destined to become. ... Consequently, the identity of the church in the world does not focus merely in bringing into the fold those whom God elected before the creation of the world. Rather, at its heart is the goal of modeling in the present the glorious human fellowship that will come at the consummation of history. The church, therefore, is a foretaste of the eschatological reality that God will one day graciously give to his creation. In short, it is a sign of the kingdom.*⁹

If the church is a “sign” then it must take care what it signifies. The ends do not justify the means, the end determines the means. How the church exists is as significant as what it achieves. Thus, if the strategies chosen for mission do not reflect the values of the kingdom, then, whatever their tactical strengths, they will not be Christian strategies and they will not advance the mission.

What are those values? Well, over and over again Paul calls on his readers to live out the new way – “put off the old, put on the new”,

“be transformed”, “be renewed”. He provides a number of lists, highlighting the type of life this suggests.¹⁰ But if we are looking for examples of how God’s way translates into human outcomes there is no better place to start than Jesus’ own descriptions of life in the new society, especially the parables. Some of these pictures of the dynamics of the kingdom begin quite specifically with “the kingdom of God is like this.” That they can seem enigmatic merely emphasises the “world turned upside down” nature of God’s new society.

There is a revealing cluster, for instance, in the fourth chapter of Mark’s gospel. The sequence begins with the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1-20) There is surely something challenging in the exuberant, almost indiscriminate casting of the seed in this parable when compared to the micro-targeted niche marketing of some mission strategies. We are left to conclude that the sower hardly knows which seeds will germinate and grow strong. A similar point emerges from the closely following parable of the seeds which sprout without the sower knowing how (Mk 4:26-29). Some of the theology of this is reflected in the very next verses, in one of the shortest kingdom parables.

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mk 4:30-32 NRSV)

Running through these parables is the surprising, relentless power of the kingdom. The tiny mustard seed becomes by natural process a huge tree, surpassing any expectation based on its original size and weight. If this is indeed what the kingdom is like, how does this quality inform our practice of being church? There are no grounds for quietist inaction here. Old arguments over the use of “means”

for mission miss the point. Strategy, planning and organisation are neither invalid nor outmoded. What is crucial is that true power lies outside the human agents. Seeds must be sown and harvests reaped, but the life force is ultimately independent of the farmer. Such parables critique the somewhat faithless pessimism which undergirds much comment on mission. Is the church about to fail because it has lost a favoured place it once held in some societies? Only if the kingdom itself has failed. Indeed, the church made small as a mustard seed might be more like the kingdom than ever.

Each of Jesus’ parables tells us something about the kingdom. We might, as well, pause at the story of the employer who took on workers at different times but paid them all the same (Mt 20:1-16). The reward was equal and it came at the end of the day. What does that say to us about leadership and incentive systems? Then there is the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35) with its challenge to our response to sin and sinners. We rarely plumb the depths of these pictures with mission in mind. Yet if, as I have suggested, we will find the best guidance on the “how” of mission in the biblical vision of mission itself, then there can be no more enlightening preparation than meditation on these parables.

As they reveal the nature of the kingdom the parables give powerful insight into the proper life and practice of the church. The movement does not stop there. Kevin Vanhoozer suggests we take this concept a step further: the church as itself a parable of the kingdom. “The people of the gospel must live in such a way as to display the dawning of the redemptive reign of God.”¹¹ This is a severe vision. Though we are happy to point to the reign of God breaking out when good things happen, in the face of our failings we are understandably reluctant to claim such a role too absolutely. We have resorted to such escape clauses as the “now and not yet” of the kingdom. Yet, although kingdom life is not the church’s

possession, it remains its only calling. A better acknowledgement would be that the kingdom is “now and not seen”. The missional church (and there is no other kind) exists to make the kingdom visible.

Endnotes

1. D.L. Guder (ed.), *Missional Church: a Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Guder’s collection is, as is obvious from the full title, focused on the American context. There remains considerable work to do before clearer specifics may be suggested for the South Pacific.
2. See K.J. Vanhoozer, “Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel” in C. Bartholomew, R. Parry and A. West (eds), *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 40-99 and G. Vandervelde, “The Challenge of Evangelical Ecclesiology” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27, 1 (January 2003): 4-26.
3. J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine Vol. 2 The Spirit of Eastern Christendom* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 275. See also R.E. Olsen, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 304-310.
4. J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 1.
5. 1 Cor 2:7.
6. Graig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 37.
7. G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).
8. P.T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and The Sacraments* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), 88.
9. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 623-4.
10. See e.g. Rom 12:9-21; 1 Cor 13:4-7; Gal 5:22-26; Eph 4:25-5:2.
11. Vanhoozer, “Evangelicalism and the Church”, 92.

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