



With the Curiosity of an Oddity from a Bygone Era: the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) conversation and its contribution to mission to the West.

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Abstract

The Western church inhabits a post-Christian context, which is just as significant a mission field as any from a non-Western background. Not realising this fact will cause the church to perpetuate paradigms of self-understandings and models of mission that do not fit this new reality, thereby draining the church's relevance for today. The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) have been addressing this issue for decades and the literature they have produced gives theological grounding for mission to the West. An exploration of their major tenets can help focus and reenergise the church's self-understanding and motivation for mission. The effects of one such church that has sought to apply one of the central motifs spurred by the GOCN conversation reveals the benefit of this deep theological reflection.

Introduction

Anyone who has presented a paper at a conference, or completed a lengthy assessment task or thesis, knows the blissful satisfaction of reading through it one last time, making the necessary changes, and hitting the "save" icon on whatever word processing software is used. Rarely, however, is that icon examined. The button that is used to "save" one's work represents a physical artefact which is no longer used in today's society – the 3.5 inch floppy disk. At one time, it was the preferred method of portable digital storage; holding a whopping 1.44 MB worth of information. Nowadays, one would be hard pressed to find a computer with a disk drive that could even receive

a 3.5 inch floppy, and the storage available on even the most basic of USBs or portable hard-drives makes the 3.5 inch capacity, laughable. These disks that were once ubiquitous, are now difficult to find – except those sold on ebay to collectors who are interested in technological yesteryear paraphernalia. In fact, most of this generation are completely unfamiliar with what this icon points to; according to one survey conducted with 1000 students from kindergarten to 5th graders, only 14% knew what the symbol actually meant (Kooser 2013).

The 3.5 inch floppy disc is perhaps an odd place to start this article, but it highlights the concept that even though forms of functionality evolve in life, (what was once useful, now no longer is), it is easy to get overly familiar with a form and fail to look at it through a critical lens.¹ The church at large has noticed that Western values and beliefs have evolved over the generations, yet seems to have forgotten to look at itself to gauge whether it may need to make any corresponding changes; in a way not too dissimilar to Microsoft continuing to use the 3.5 inch floppy as its “save” icon despite its functionality being long since succeeded.

The Western church inhabits a post-Christian context which is just as significant a mission field as any from a non-Western background. The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) have taken up the challenge to confront the church with this truth. This article then, is an attempt to engage with the literature produced by the GOCN, in order to give theological foundation to a missiological doctrine of the church and to prompt further discussion. A brief overview of the GOCN will begin this article, so as to place the network in historical perspective. It will then seek to identify the central motifs that have arisen in the GOCN’s literature and why they are important for understanding the church’s mission today. Finally, this article will reflect briefly on a local church that is seeking to live out one of these motifs in concrete ways. The ability to wrestle with these deep issues and allow them to shape Christian praxis is crucial if the church is to be faithful to its Lord, and its mandated mission and perhaps to counter the church being viewed with the curiosity of an oddity from a bygone era – much like a 5th grader looking at a floppy disk and wondering what its purpose might be.

An Introduction to the GOCN

“Can the West be converted?” Though many factors contributed to the genesis of the GOCN, that simple question asked by General Simatoupong of Indonesia at the World Council of Churches conference on World Mission and Evangelisation in Bangkok (1972-1973), was among the more significant. This question, heard in passing by British missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin, echoed throughout his consciousness over the coming years and led him to ask what a genuine missionary encounter with Western culture would look like (Newbigin 1973, 1985).

Lesslie Newbigin

Newbigin was born in the UK in 1909. At the age of 27, along with his wife, he became a missionary to South India. For more than 3 decades Newbigin served in various roles as Pastor, seminary teacher and Bishop of the Church of South India. Upon his return to England in 1974, he was shocked to find “the ‘Christian’ England he had left as a young man had lost its Christian identity” (Zscheile 2011, p. xii), prompting him

¹ Kidman writes on his blog, “Even if an actual floppy is no longer the storage medium of choice, the familiarity of the icon ultimately becomes much more important than the original ‘logic’ behind choosing that symbol.” (Kidman 2012)

to come out of retirement and engage afresh the irreligious context of Great Britain. The British Council of Churches requested that Newbigin, in consultation with other theologians and practitioners throughout the UK, prepare an essay to provoke discussion in their 1984 conference – *The Other Side of 1984* was the result. This essay, along with Newbigin’s many other works – especially *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) – prompted much discussion and eventually led to the formation of the Gospel and Our Culture Programme; a collection of theologians and practitioners that sought to examine the question of what a missionary encounter with the British cultural context would look like. Their efforts sparked discussion in several locales throughout the Western world – such as South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia – but it was in North America and Canada that these discussions really caught alight.

The GOCN in North America

The “great new fact” of the late 80’s and 90’s was that the United States and Canada were not just postmodern, but increasingly post-Christian, and hence just as much a mission field as the lands outside of North America (Van Gelder 1996a, pp. 57-68). The church that once held much prestige and influence had been pushed to the margins of society, its status lost and voice muted (Van Gelder 1996b, p. 43). Like the Israelites in exile, those who had taken note of this situation had to re-examine their community’s *raison d’etre*. This prompted several theologians and pastors to network together, take up Newbigin’s gauntlet, and reflect on what these shifts meant, “under the light of the gospel, for the life and witness of the church” (The Gospel and Our Culture Network 2008).

This network began in 1987 and was coordinated by Dr. George Hunsberger, an ordained minister with the Presbyterian Church, Professor of Missiology at Western Theological Seminary and former missionary to East Africa. Hunsberger completed his PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary on Newbigin’s theology of cultural plurality. He modified this work for the GOCN publication *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, which sought to provide a theological and theoretical framework for the church’s missionary engagement with its culture (Hunsberger 1998, p. 8). By the early 1990’s, the members of the network were convening once a year and a quarterly newsletter was being published (Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011, p. 47).

Joining Hunsberger was Darrell Guder, also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, who had served in educational and pastoral positions in North America and Germany. Hunsberger invited Guder to work on a project he had recently obtained a grant for (Guder 2000, p. xii), and along with a team of four missiologists from diverse backgrounds (Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, Alan Roxburgh, Craig Van Gelder),² they produced the seminal work, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.

Though *Missional* was not the first work published by the GOCN – *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* was released prior to it in 1996, drawing together many of the core elements of the GOCN discussion thus far – it nevertheless was the text that shaped the course of the conversation for many years to come. *Missional* sought to

² All these co-authors deserve a paragraph in their own right and have contributed greatly to the GOCN conversation with many other publications and edited works. Space constraints will not allow for that level of detail, though I do draw on their works as primary sources throughout this article. Joining them as consultants were also four respected theologians: Justo Gonzalez, Douglas John Hall, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Howard Yoder.

articulate what a missiological ecclesiology would look like in the North American context (Guder 2000, p. xii). After surveying the cultural and ecclesial contexts of their day, they concluded it was time for a “dramatically new vision,” rather than “a mere tinkering with long-assumed notions of the identity and mission of the church” (Guder 1998, p. 77). And paint that vision they did. Using theology, history, and cultural analysis, the authors reframed the identity of the church as a communal witness of the reign of God, sent out into the world, to join the missionary God on mission – and explored the implications this would have on the structures of the church in North America.

Though at times written a little too academically for the non-academic to engage with,³ and perhaps lacking in concreteness, so the concepts can occasionally seem vague and difficult to translate into practical situations, it is an outstanding piece of literature which – like Newbigin’s works did in previous years – was the catalyst for much theological reflection on the nature of the church. Many other works followed and the conversation has continued to bloom over the ensuing years. What follows, is an attempt to draw together some of the various threads of the literature the GOCN has produced, and categorise them into key motifs – thereby exploring the GOCN contribution to mission in the West.⁴

Central Motifs of the GOCN

One of the central tenets of the GOCN – though this was first put forward by Newbigin – is that a dialogue take place between the gospel, Western culture, and the church (Hunsberger 1996, pp. 8-9). They argue that for a truly missiological stance towards the West to be authentic, then cultural analysis must be performed, deep theological reflection must be undertaken and congregational practice must be examined (Hunsberger 1996, pp. 290-291).⁵ Until the church realises that Western culture has drifted from its Christian moorings, it will not genuinely engage with it; the church will thereby be speaking a foreign language to its context and hence will not effectively communicate to an audience that so desperately needs to hear its message.⁶

The GOCN have engaged in this three-way conversation for decades, and have theologised, conversed, experimented, and written about what a missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture would look like. The genesis of their efforts was a fresh look at the missionary nature of the triune God.

³ Something that members of the GOCN have themselves acknowledged (Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011, p. 2 & p. 49).

⁴ It is acknowledged that the motifs explored below are my reading of the GOCN publications and therefore open to my own bias and interpretation; others may read the same body of work and consider other themes more crucial. Cronshaw & Devenish (2014) for example have also identified central ideas of the GOCN conversation; I would recommend their excellent article to the reader.

⁵ Hunsberger (1996) suggests that, “Our most fundamental missional calling is to live the same way in our own culture that we counsel others to live in theirs. This we cannot do unless we are seriously attentive to the character of our culture, receptive to the shaping force of the gospel, and willing to bear our missional identity as a gospel-shaped community” (p. 291).

⁶ This is in part, a lesson to be learnt from the incarnation of Christ; “To be good news, the gospel must make sense to those who are hearing it...In becoming flesh, Jesus Christ as the living Word became understandable, knowable, and accessible for all time and to all persons” (Van Gelder, 2007, p. 62).

A Trinitarian Emphasis

Early on in the conversation, an emphasis developed that pointed to the Trinitarian doctrine of God as the key to reclaiming the church's true nature. The primary focus was on the economic Trinity; the Father's sending the Son, the Father and Son's sending of the Spirit, and the Father, Son and Spirit sending the church into the world. "This conception changed the playing field for thinking about mission by shifting the rationale and agency of mission away from the church and placing them instead within the life of the Trinity" (Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011, p. 26).⁷ In recent years, the social model of the Trinity, for which Moltmann is the great exponent, has especially contributed to the shape of Trinitarian theology as it is reflected in the literature of the GOCN. Social Trinitarianism focuses on the relational unity of Father, Son and Spirit.⁸ In this social model of the Trinity, the term *perichoresis*, which speaks of the mutual indwelling or interpenetration of the members of the Trinity, has proven to be rich and evocative. *Perichoresis* may be seen as a pattern for the church to emulate; within the life of the Trinity and the church there is "inclusion, unity and cohesion; but there is also differentiation, identity, and plurality. Our life together is to have correspondence with their life together" (Branson 2007, p. 125).⁹ Though this view needs to be balanced by New Testament examples (as well as contemporary cases) of local churches marked by fragmentation and division, it lifts one's eyes to the possibility of what the church should be, rather than what it all too often is. What has been absent in the literature and requiring further investigation is the connection between ecclesiological *perichoresis* and missiological implications. Christ pointed to the visible oneness and mutual love of his followers as a prime element of their communal life, and that this would act as evidence that his followers were indeed, following him (John 13:34-35; 17:20-23).

The Kingdom of God

The GOCN have also realised that the West needs to revisit Jesus' central message – the imminent inbreaking of the reign of God, including its present dimension (Matt 4:17, 23; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:42-44; John 3:5; Acts 1:3).¹⁰ Jesus' proclamation was that God now ruled and his rule would triumph over sin and the forces of evil in the

⁷ Kwiyani (2013) calls this movement of agency from the church to God as "one of the greatest landmarks in Christian theology in the twentieth century" (p. 162).

⁸ Economic Trinitarianism developed in the West and has tended towards a structural, hierarchical, monarchical, and patriarchal view of God (Simpson 2007, pp. 82-83). The Eastern emphasis on the relationality of the Trinity stands in contrast to this with its mutual reciprocity of shared power (Bilezikian 1997, pp. 57-68; Seamands 2005, p. 39).

⁹ Mark Husbands (2009) would disagree stating that the Trinity should not be understood as the model for human social patterns. He argues that humans cannot reflect the divine paradigm of interaction due to their creatureliness and asks rather pointedly; "Where is this concrete human community of dynamic self-giving and love of which you speak so positively?' Is it not in fact the case that social trinitarians offer an inordinately idealist account of social relations?" (p. 125). The fact that it is rarely a reality does not necessarily indicate it is untrue. Moreover, Jesus prayed that just as He and his Father were one, so too, his followers would be one (John 17:20-23). That the world would be able to recognize the oneness of Jesus' followers means that it is more than a metaphorical unity and is visibly displayed in their relationships with one another. Furthermore, though the discussion of the *imago Dei* is far from conclusive, it is highly probable that the *imago Dei* refers to the relationality of humanity which reflects the triunity of the Godhead. It therefore follows that the ideal for humanity includes this reciprocal relationship of love, mutuality and service.

¹⁰ It has been argued that the gospel that Jesus preached has not necessarily been the gospel that the church has preached, and this has impoverished the church's sense of missional identity (Guder 1998, p. 88).

present, as well as the future. This is the gospel; God reigns and access to him is granted because of the salvific act of his Son, through the work of the Spirit.

This reframes how the church is to live. Rather than falling into the trap of Old Testament Israel, tragically preoccupied with itself and “constantly self-absorbed with its own national survival” (Glasser 2003, p. 187), the church is called not to live for itself, but to announce the reign and sovereignty of an exceedingly good God. Hunsberger states it succinctly: “Most simply and directly put, it is the church’s mission to represent the reign of God” (Hunsberger 1996, p. 15). The church is to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom; “The church becomes the *sign* that redemption is now present in the world, a *foretaste* of what that redemption is like, and an *instrument* to carry that message into every local context to the ends of the earth” (Van Gelder 2007, p. 19).

God’s kingdom is present now and accessible to anyone, and yet, it is also still to come. Any authentic announcement of the kingdom must include the eschatological reality inherent in Jesus’ proclamation and kingdom deeds. This announcement “pulls back the veil on the coming reign of God, thereby revealing the horizon of the world’s future. The gospel portrays the coming of Jesus, and particularly his death and resurrection, as the decisive, truly eschatological event in the world’s history” (Guder 1998, p. 86). His life, death and resurrection is but a portion of the good news of the kingdom of God breaking into the present. His second advent completes the picture – everything that is opposed to God’s rule will be judged and the world will once again come under the kingship of Yahweh.

The Western church has by and large acquiesced to a privatised faith; its sole concern with individual salvation is an inadequate proclamation of the gospel Jesus preached (Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011, p. 29). The message of the kingdom also challenges the many elements of Western culture that reject the rule of God. The good news of the kingdom is one that speaks to both the church and culture calling for them to turn; “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17).

The *Missio Dei*

The message that God presently reigns brought back into sharp focus the truth that God is active in the world. Western theology developed in a context that was essentially entirely Christian – at least in name – and therefore had little interest in the world outside the church; the discipline of missiology largely remained peripheral in Western theology (Bosch 1995a, pp. 27-32).¹¹ Bosch (1995b) rightly contended that if theology “ignores the question ‘Why mission?’ it implicitly ignores the questions, ‘Why the church?’ and ‘Why even the gospel?’” (pp. 495-496). Indeed, he argued that theology is not theology if it loses its missionary character; “theology rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*” (p. 494).¹² That Western theology never really engaged with missiology in its attempts to understand God in relation to his world, meant that churches and Christians schooled within its

¹¹ Contrast that with theology throughout Asia and Africa however, and one gets a vastly different picture; developed in a non-Christian context, their theology is missiological through and through (Bosch 1995a, p. 27-28).

¹² Though Bosch was not part of the GOCN (having passed away in an automobile accident in 1992 in his home country of South Africa), many members in the GOCN have drawn on his writings considerably in the formulation of their teachings.

paradigms would necessarily lose sight of the missionary nature of God and of their own identity as God's missionary people.

Hence, one of the prime themes of the GOCN surrounds the *missio Dei* – God's mission. Bosch (1995b) defines the *missio Dei* as God's self-revelation as the one who loves the world, who embraces both the church and the world, and who invites the church to partner with him in the world (p. 10, pp. 389-391). God has a universal plan where all creation is reconciled to him and he takes the initiative in bringing it to pass. Mission is therefore more than just an activity of the church, it is the "result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation" (Guder 1998, p. 4). First and foremost, God is the one on mission.

To say that mission belongs to God is not to say that it does not belong to the church.¹³ As Christ's body in the world, it is called to co-labour with the triune God, in the triune God's mission. The church is not the sole location of the activity of God, but is a tool he has chosen to use to accomplish his plan.¹⁴ Newbigin (1998) rightly asserts that the church cannot escape its missionary calling if it is to be faithful to the missionary God; "We are not engaged in an enterprise of our own choosing or devising. We are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself" (p. 83).

Reflection on the *missio Dei* has brought the world back onto the church's map – not that the church had intentionally ignored the world – rather that the church, shaped by a theology that was not missiological, tended to exclusively claim the location of the activity of God within its realm. The GOCN have sought to remind the West that "God cannot be restricted to what has been and is happening in Western cultural Christianity" (Guder 2000, p. 20).

A Public Truth

If the kingdom of the triune God has come and the church has been called to participate in the mission to point others to that kingdom, then the Christian faith cannot be a private truth for personalised religious practice. Newbigin has argued that the modern world has dichotomized private and public spheres and to accept this is to "deny the kingship of Christ over all of life – public and private. It is to deny that Christ is, simply and finally, the truth by which all other claims to truth are to be tested" (Newbigin 1986, p. 102).

As the church has been pushed to the margins of society, it has tended to focus exclusively on private spiritual matters and abdicate its responsibility to speak of the reign of God and its implications for the public world of economics, politics and culture. To declare the good news in the public square is an apostolic task of the church (Guder 1998, pp. 136-137). Brownson rightly affirms that, "the truth of the gospel can never be simply relegated to the sphere of the private, local, and particular. The gospel's claim to offer good news of cosmic significance is a constant prod to Christians to reach beyond

¹³ Wright (2006) rightly labels this idea – that because mission was God's, it therefore meant that the church had no part to play – a distortion (p. 63).

¹⁴ Seeing the church as the exclusive location of the activity of God can make the church responsible to carry out activities in the world on behalf of God (Van Gelder, 2007, p. 18-19). If that is the case, an inactive church means no mission takes place. Yet that does not ring true to the biblical witness of the God who moves and acts and takes initiative even prior to his people's active involvement (such as the act of Creation, the calling of Abraham, or the incarnation of Christ). There is no Scriptural question that God desires to partner with humanity, but he is not bound by uncooperative partners.

their own enclaves to address and challenge their culture and world with the gracious and hopeful claim that Jesus is lord” (Brownson 1996, p. 258). To leave the public realm uncontested is an abandonment of its calling (Newbigin 1986, p. 102).¹⁵

Genuine Dialogue with Culture

The fact that the gospel is a public truth does not however, mean that the church should revert to the old Christendom model of enforcing its values and lifestyle upon a nominally Christian culture. The biblical narrative reveals God meeting people within their own cultures and using the confines of those cultures to communicate his purposes.¹⁶ Brownson thus comments, that “the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly multicultural” (Brownson 1996, p. 236). God both works with and judges human culture; discernment is needed therefore so that the church can affirm what God may be affirming and judge what God is judging. This requires a genuine dialogue with the culture. This cannot happen however, if the view of culture is dominated by either disdain or uncritical acceptance. What is crucial is that one learns to “distinguish the gospel of the Crucified One from the rhetorical values, pretensions and pursuits of this society” (Hall 1996, p. 213).

The choice of the word “our” in the GOCN reveals the extent that they are committed to this. Though lengthy, it is worth quoting Hunsberger (1996) in full:

[There are] two important reasons why we cannot simply assume that we ourselves represent the gospel pole [of the culture, church, gospel dialogue]. First, our way of understanding God and putting the gospel can never be equated with the God who engages us and the message God addresses to us and the whole of the world. Our grasp and experience are necessarily partial; they are historically and culturally framed. We dare not treat this ‘gospel and culture’ thing as though we fit easily on the gospel side of it. Second, we dare not assume that we sit at some comfortable critical distance from the culture part of the equation, that we somehow are placed over against it. We are never that distinct from our culture. We are participants in it. We are shaped by it, and it pervades our entire framework of meanings and motivations. It shapes in a particular way our capacities to hear and grasp and decide about the gospel that is coming to us from God, and it colors the form of all our responses to it. It is ‘our’ culture we are speaking about, as much as it is ‘our’ God who encounters us within it. (pp. 294-295)

If one does not analyse culture, as well as reflect deeply on the gospel, a malformed gospel may result. Humans have a tendency to reduce the gospel to “fit” their culture – what Guder (2000) calls “gospel reductionism”.¹⁷ Shenk contends that the church only remains relevant as long as it remains in tension with culture; the task

¹⁵ This motif does seem to have had greater emphasis in the GOCN’s earlier works and far greater prominence in the British conversation.

¹⁶ For example, God cuts a covenant with Abraham which was a cultural custom of the day to ratify the agreement. Furthermore, God accedes to Israel’s request for a King in their desire to be like the other nations (1 Sam 8:7-8). Though the monarchy was not his initiative, he yet works through it and covenants with David, which ultimately leads to Jesus’ kingship.

¹⁷ Guder (2000) states that humanity’s sinfulness “expresses itself in a constant, and often subtle, process: while adapting the gospel to the cultural context, which is essential to faithful witness, there is always the temptation to bring the gospel under control, to make it manageable. Thus, the task of witness as translation makes the continuing conversion of the Christian community necessary as it interacts with its culture” (p. 97).

is to train its members to view culture through the critically constructive lenses of the missionary (Shenk 1996, p. 78). Therefore, the stance is not one of disdain but rather it is one of cautious critique, challenging that which is anti-gospel but nevertheless ready to affirm that which aligns with the gospel. Critiquing one's culture is difficult because one is so often blind to its pervasive influence – or even its existence – but this is vital if one is to be a faithful witness of Jesus Christ. For Western churches to avoid this tendency of gospel reductionism, it means “maintaining the readiness to recognize unwarranted accommodations to their culture in order to disentangle themselves, while discovering the Spirit's creative work to make the church a faithfully Western incarnation of the gospel” (Hunsberger 1998, p. 279).

Disentangling and discovering are both necessary and do not occur without dialogue. A posture of openness is required, where “missionaries seek to share life and listen deeply in community with those to whom they are sent” (Zscheile 2013, p. 32). If the church fails to enter into genuine conversation with its culture, communication will not take place. Since the time of Constantine until relatively recently, the church and Western culture largely spoke the same language – that of Christendom. It no longer does so; the church tends to continue to speak Christendom's dialect whilst Western culture has moved beyond its Christian roots. For the gospel to be effectively communicated, it needs to be contextualised for this day and age. Van Gelder (2007) writes that Spirit-led congregations are those that are always forming (seeking to contextualise) and reforming (seeking to maintain the historic faith) (pp. 54-55). For the gospel to take root once more in the West, this process must be engaged in.

The church must be challenged to engage with its culture from a critical perspective, whilst embodying its message within the context it finds itself in, for without this, there can be no genuine contextualisation and hence no effective mission. In the words of the writers of *Missional Church*, “the church is always bicultural [living simultaneously in both the world and the kingdom], conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living towards the language and ethics of the gospel” (Guder 1998, p. 114). As Bevans (1999) helpfully remarks, being counter-cultural does not necessitate being anti-cultural (p. 154).

The Role of the Local Church

In many ways, the GOCN discussions find their locus in the question regarding the role of the local church.¹⁸ One of the foundational premises of the GOCN conversation is that being a missional church is about an understanding of “*being* that leads to *doing*, rather than starting at *doing*” (Stache 2009, p. 238). The church must first know what it *is* before it knows what it *does*. Van Gelder (2007) writes, “Purpose and strategy are not unimportant in the missional conversation, but they are understood to be derivative dimensions of understanding the nature, or essence, of the church” (p. 17). The church is a local community of believers inspired by the Spirit,

¹⁸ One member of the writing team of *Missional Church*, has more recently argued that the conversation has indeed been sidetracked. Roxburgh (2011) who has a unique “insiders” perspective due to his long participation with the GOCN, contends that the questions asked up until this point are the wrong questions because they are all about the church. To recover a church that is capable of engaging contemporary culture, he suggests the need to leave the question alone and move to asking questions about Scripture and culture. “The focus has been on one side of the triangle at the expense of the other two. The ecclesial element, the conversation about the missional church, has subsumed the other two within its agenda, so we see gospel and culture through the lens of church” (p. 54).

centring their communal lives on the person of Christ and participating in the mission of God by being the sign, instrument and foretaste of his coming reign.

Newbigin (1989) believed that the local congregation was the hermeneutic of the gospel, that the above motifs found their expression in the local congregation – if, of course, the local congregation faithfully lived out its calling (pp. 232-233). This will require the church to be “different from its surroundings in order to make visible and witness faithfully to the in-breaking reign of God” (Guder 1998, p. 128). Adjectives such as “alternative” and “contrast” are often used to describe the life of the church, because living under the rule of God will fashion a community into different forms than that of the prevailing culture. Its leadership practices, its way of being together, its way of serving the world, will be guided by kingdom values and hence will reveal that the new reality of God’s reign is present now; “When it is healthy, Christ-centred and mission oriented, the local church is the proof of its own gospel, validating through its own life the presence and power of the kingdom of God” (Cronshaw & Devenish 2014, p. 90). The church is on display. Indeed, the church is the display.

The look of this type of church community will vary between contexts. “Missional engagement is not homogenous; there is no one-size-fits-all pattern” (Roxburgh & Boren 2009, p. 85). Though the lack of a clearly defined model would make it difficult for many church leaders to embrace, the reason why the GOCN have been so content with ambiguity regarding appearance or structure is that becoming missional really is all about the dialogue between Scripture, a particular culture, and a particular body of believers – the latter two being unique to each specific context. Form therefore follows mandate. The church has to structure itself in a way that works within its unique context, constantly open to changing its structures to best allow mission to occur.

Beyond Theological Reflection

The above motifs that the GOCN have wrestled with must go beyond just an idealised vision of what could or should be, and be placed into a concrete reality for any benefit to the church to have effect. I have had the privilege in recent months to liaise with a local church that is taking at least one of these themes seriously – the Trinitarian emphasis. Since the beginning of 2013, Clayton Church of Christ (CCoC) has been basing their ministry philosophy on a Trinitarian theology.¹⁹ My time with the ministry has been brief – though I have known a few of the leaders for several years. I was invited to spend a weekend with their university campus ministry for a retreat as their guest speaker. Prior to the retreat, I met with two of the key leaders, and whilst at the retreat, I discussed some of their recent philosophical shifts with the Pastor who oversees this ministry. Several weeks after the retreat, I asked them via a questionnaire some questions regarding how a Trinitarian focus has impacted their ministry.

One benefit cited was the gradual decrease of individualistic mindsets and a corresponding increase in awareness of the body ministering to one another. For example, a shift has begun in attendance patterns amongst their cell groups; where once it was heard that people would opt out of attending a cell group due to “not getting anything out of it”, there has been an increase of people choosing to attend even if they did not “feel” like it, because someone else in the group might miss out due to their absence and what they might contribute to the group. Another example can be seen during their time of corporate worship; CCoC have been teaching that ministering to

¹⁹ Their focus has not been primarily stirred by GOCN literature but they have allowed Trinitarian theology to inform their ministry praxis – in particular, the social Trinitarian perspective.

one another is an act of worship to God, and hence, during their time gathered together they are encouraged to look around and be a conduit of God's voice towards one another through praying or prophesying over one another. I was able to witness this first hand and even be the recipient of such a prayer; "In so doing, we are coming together as a body before God, rather than 50 individuals in a room with no consciousness of the person beside them."²⁰

An increase in unity and loving relationships is also cited as a by-product of this attempt to concretize a Trinitarian theology in the life of this congregation. People of diversity (international and local students for example) are being welcomed and finding a place of belonging. People are also becoming more conscious of those who are isolated in their midst and therefore more actively cared for. Attempting to live out the "one another lifestyle" in genuine community, speaking the truth in love, serving one another in mutual reciprocity, is producing heart transformation in the lives of those that attend CCoC.

The GOCN conversation is primarily missiological in nature and as yet, there does not seem to be a significant missional outflow at CCoC. Perhaps, this may be more a result of a focus on social Trinitarianism over economic Trinitarianism, where the "sending" of God is just as important as the "relating" of God. Nevertheless, it is still early days and there does seem to be movement in a missional direction. For example, the overseeing pastor envisages that evangelism would move from an individualistic effort to a cell group effort. During a workshop whilst on the retreat, there was already discussion regarding what the cell groups could do together to be a sign of the kingdom of God.²¹ Vision also exists that sees mission being driven by the "groups intimacy with the Head [Jesus], not the top leader's direction";²² something missional thinkers have been advocating for some years.

What I observed in my own heart over the course of the weekend was a softening or a wooing back to the church. It is difficult to be cynical towards the church – which the missional conversation sometimes lends itself to – when faced with a group of believers who are genuinely and faithfully trying to live out the image of the Triune God as a corporate body.

Conclusion

The Western church finds itself in uncharted waters. Pushed to the margins, it no longer has the voice in society it once enjoyed. In one sense, this is to be expected as Jesus himself declared that the world would persecute his followers (John 15:18-20). In another sense, this can be seen as an oxymoronic situation; the called out community of Christ was to be a city on a hill and a light in the darkness (Matt 5:14-15). The contemporary situation in the West shows that it is neither, and therefore requires a radical revision of the church's identity and mandate.²³

²⁰ Pastor Chee Fah, personal communication, August 17 2013. Used by permission.

²¹ One particular cell group were in concrete discussions regarding what they could do in their university as a cell group to bring the kingdom to others.

²² Pastor Chee Fah, personal communication, August 17 2013. Used by permission.

²³ This is not to say that individual churches are not salt and light in their community. Rather, it is to say that Western culture rarely looks to the church for light or as an example of a society of shalom. It is a fact to be celebrated and rejoiced over that many churches throughout the West are in fact shining a significant light in the darkness of their world, even if the West does not acknowledge it. God is still using his church to point people to his kingdom.

The GOCN have been bold enough to face this dim reality. According to the GOCN's writings, the path to recovery is through a dialogue between the gospel, Western culture and the church. Without a genuine conversation between these three elements, the gospel will fail to penetrate the cultural barrier of the West – not because it lacks the power to do so (Rom 1:16), but because it will not be communicated in a way it will be understood.

The GOCN's "three-cornered" conversations have brought many issues to light. These issues have stirred up much discussion and have reinvigorated the questions surrounding God's being, God's purposes, and the essence of God's people. It cannot however remain at the level of theological reflection. These themes need to be processed in the hearts and minds of a local community of Christ followers, and then acted out in highly contextualized ways within the locale that community finds itself in. Embodying these motifs will hopefully challenge forms of the church that are perhaps simply carryovers from previous generations, and rather than look on the church with the curiosity of an oddity from a bygone era, society may once again acknowledge that the church's message carries relevance and life today.

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