

The Church According to Webber (October 31, 2011)

Gordon,

As requested, what follows is the church according to Webber. You are well aware of my rants, which you have been unfortunately subject to orally and in writing in numerous venues over the years. The most recent was perhaps the series of 4 papers delivered at Church Offices in May of 2007. You also may have seen a manuscript of mine titled, Dreams of a Rural Church Fanatic, unpublished but floating around digitally for a good long while. You may not have seen the papers I delivered to the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand at Balclutha in June of 2009 where I was the keynote speaker at a conference on rural ministry. They are available as PDF downloads at <http://www.synod.org.nz/page/27/DownloadableArticles.html>.

All of what I write in this tome has appeared in these other places but what is new in this presentation is the framework. I am going to use a template to present my thoughts, one that was shared by Bruce Fraser at our recent workshop “Eldership Unleashed” held in May of this year at Forbes Presbyterian Church, Grand Prairie, AB. Bruce was our keynote speaker and hales from The Presbyterian Synod of Otago and Southland NZ, where he is the Mission Advisor. I hereby acknowledged my use of his template as well as much of his thinking as well.

1. Introduction

Is the Church failing in the 21st century Canadian context as it shrinks in almost every way, or is Christ reforming the church? I am excited as I look at the apparent failure of the church in Canada today because I am convinced that the Lord of the church is reforming His church. What is it going to be like? Those who flog a popular emergent church theory argue we can't know, because what the church will become is dependent upon particular and peculiar contexts. According to them, the church will be formed by the context. In my mind, nothing could be further from the truth. The church of Jesus Christ will not be formed by context but the Word of God. I think we can know what the church Christ is reforming will be like by looking at the Church in the Word, specifically in the New Testament.

For want of better terms I will use Fraser's template here and call that New Testament church the “Apostolic Church;” the church as we have known it since about the mid fourth century until now the “Church of Christendom;” and the church Christ is presently reforming as the “Post Christendom Church.” Constantine birthed the church of Christendom in the early 4th century when he declared the Roman Empire to be Christian. Quickly the Christian church was drug out of its counterculture, small group community, risk taking existence and was thrust into a major role in culture, compelled to become huge and institutional. The Church of Christendom reached its peak in the mid 17th Century and then, as it fully embraced the modernity of the various enlightenment movements as authoritative, perhaps

more than the Word of God, it really began a decline that we are reaping the fruits of still today.

It seems to be bitter fruit. But what if Christ is taking the church back to the counterculture, small group community, risk-taking form of the New Testament? If that is so, the fruit seems bitter only because it is not yet fully formed.

2. Buildings

A survey of Acts and Paul's epistles shows that in the Apostolic Church, there were no dedicated church buildings. History can attest that after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and the resultant "Benediction Against the Heretics" read in the Jewish synagogues each Sabbath, Christians found themselves thrown out of the Jewish synagogue. If they had not been before, certainly they now had to meet primarily in believer's homes. Roman persecution of Christians in the same timeframe further pushed Christians to the fringe of society and made house churches not only the norm but the only choice. This house church reality is what is reflected in the New Testament, and it is the biblical norm for Christ's church (EG: Rom.16.3-16). In this apostolic form, what mattered for the church was intimate intentional faith communities gathered around the Word and the Lord's Table, not church buildings (Acts 2.42).

With the declaration of Christianity as the faith of the Empire in the 4th Century, suddenly the basilica became a reality for the church. Elaborate buildings became central to the notion and experience of church. Building placement in a community needed to be central and prominent. The building became the prime focus for the church. This has continued to be so to this day.

However, as Presbyterian congregations shrink, particularly in the rural context of Canada, the building has become an albatross financially. However it really has been an albatross from the very get go, not because of finances but because of what it has done to the formation of community. Buildings have demanded the church form congregations, large gatherings that that tend to be cold collectivities (per Karl Jung). This sadly has become normative rather than intentional intimate faith communities housed in believer's homes.

In the Post Christendom Church, dedicated church buildings will once again cease to be the norm, especially in the rural context. In fact, they will be rejected. I emphasize this; church buildings must be willfully rejected. They have to be. Anything less and buildings will continue to be problematic for the church. In the Presbyterian context we continue to place a higher value on buildings than on community formation and equipped leadership. Cluster ministries, as we are presently practicing them, are in most cases little more than building survival plans. In other cases, Presbyteries allow congregations to keep their buildings as they dismiss their teaching elders due to tight finances. Across our nation, particularly in the rural context, 30 or fewer believers gather weekly in cold church buildings to stare at the backs of one another's heads and sink into an ill informed faith. In my experience of house church in the Cariboo, we have between 10 to 45 people per

house church gathering weekly in a warm house and we look one another square in the eye. Without a building there is no need for all the committees and headaches associated with the institution and its physical plant. People are liberated to dedicate themselves to Christ and the formation of intimate community. It is the New Testament example; the biblical norm. It will become the rule for the Post Christendom Church, especially in rural Canada. It is an exciting time for the church.

In the PCC, church courts, national church office and college personnel will have to be prepared to assist and equip leaders and faith communities to make this exciting shift. There is a critical need for conversion at the church court, national office and college level first. Unfortunately, in my opinion, there is little intestinal fortitude for this conversion amongst present personnel. Rather, there seems to be a lot of lip service and a fair bit of cranial rectal insertion going around. Few people in our administrative and educational institutions really believe that a church without dedicated buildings is normative, practical and beneficial for the 21st century.

3. Leadership

In the Church of Christendom, leadership and ministry deteriorate into almost an exclusive emphasis on the teacher/pastor/administrator role, primarily dedicated to serving the institution rather than equipping the saints for ministry. Hierarchical leadership by an institutionally ordained clergy operating primarily in a pastor-teacher-administrator mode to serve the institution is what we know as normative in the PCC.

In the Apostolic Church, leadership didn't look at all like what we have now. For one thing, any split between clergy and lay did not exist. There is not any New Testament basis for ordination based upon office to serve the institution. Leadership was grassroots, extremely well trained in situ, set apart to serve a particular function and expressing a diverse 5 fold ministry of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher. These functions were dedicated to equipping the laos to serve as ministers of Christ. (Eph. 4.11) Leadership was also often itinerating and or part time or "tentmaker" in style.

This will become the way leadership will develop within the Post Christendom Church as well. There will cease to be a priestly hierarchical ordained leadership, but leadership will be entirely function based, come from the grassroots of particular faith communities and be well trained and equipped in situ (i.e. within actual faith communities rather than the fleshpots of Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver). Stone theological schools anchored in one or two large centers will not survive but rather digitally based equippers traveling the information highway will become the norm. Many if not most leaders will not make their whole living from the church. Gone are the days when people can invest 7 or more years of education in obtaining a career that pays less than most vocational trades and has even less standing in society. Some leaders will function as itinerate overseers and function in an Episcopal manner with several faith communities. (Presbyterians will obviously have to figure out a different name for this ... wait a minute, we have a good one already ...

Presbyter.) This style of leadership training and leadership function will obviously greatly benefit the rural church. However a radical shift will have to be made in how we raise up and equip leaders.

I am not sure that a leadership that emphasizes a five-fold ministry has ever officially existed in the PCC. It certainly does not today. It will in the Post Christendom Church. I look forward to the day when elders will once again be chosen on the basis of being able to function in leadership as “apostles” (pioneers sent to those outside the faith community) “prophets” (one who encourages faithfulness within the faith community) “evangelists” (one who bears the gospel to the unsaved) as well as pastors and teachers. These are the biblical functions of an elder, not the office of ruling and administering an institution.

In the Post Christendom Church, especially in the rural context, buildings will become a valuable resource from which faith communities can harvest the capital that, when rightfully invested, will become a large part of the ongoing source of funds needed to raise up and equip leaders as elders and overseers. In the Post Christendom Church, as in the Apostolic Church, well-equipped and qualified leaders will be normative, not church buildings.

All this being said, there is a completely different skill set needed to lead small groups of believers into ministry, mission and the formation of intimate community. And yet, the leaders being called, supported and equipped today are for the main part still being trained to serve a large institutional congregation that is housed in a building, preferably with a pipe organ or at least an amplified church band; i.e. a Christendom church. I chuckle every time I slip into a mostly empty church building where 20 or so believers are being led in worship designed for a congregation of 300 or more. It’s downright comical if not painful. Yet this is the style of leadership promoted, supported and trained in our church. We need a radical change in the ordering, supporting and training of our leadership. The question remains, are the courts, national offices and colleges up to the task?

4. Sacraments

In the Apostolic Church it is obvious from the New Testament that what we have come to call the Sacraments were not practiced at all like they are in the Church of Christendom that we have inherited. Communion was celebrated as a real community meal. (Acts 2:46b-47) Baptism was practiced as a celebration of conversion and entrance into the community (Acts 8.25ff). Ordination had nothing to do with either practice. Baptism and the Lord’s Table belonged to the community of faith and were unabashedly celebrated by the community of faith whenever they met, or in the case of baptism, whenever they had need. The Lord’s Table was all about community and Baptism was all about entering into community with other believers. The presence of “Clergy” was never an issue. In fact, some notable New Testament leaders did not see it as their place to preside because they were coming in from outside a particular faith community and to do so would have been divisive

(1Cor.1.14ff). Baptism and Communion were celebrations and they truly belonged to the faith community not to the clergy or institution.

With the dawn of the age of Christendom there was a huge institutionalisation of grace through the Sacraments. The Sacraments were no longer primarily a celebration of community but a dispersal of grace through the institution at the hand of its official clerics. It was a horrible oppressive way of control that spawned a revolt that we know as the Reformation. The problem is, that there has been slippage ever since the time of Hus, Luther, Calvin and Knox, to the point that we who pride ourselves now as their descendants in the faith look more like the medieval church they revolted against. And we tout ourselves as reformed and always reforming?

In the Post Christendom Church, there will be a return to the apostolic way, not because faith communities don't have the resources to pay for clergy in rural settings but because of the need to reclaim the rightful place of Baptism and the Lord's Table in the faith community. The Post Christendom Church will redeem and reclaim Baptism and Communion and will even adopt new symbols and events as well (EG; foot washing, anointing and such). In the PCC, church courts, national offices and colleges will have to get on board with this emerging reality to remain credible. A sacramental revolt is already happening and these institutions seem to have their collective heads in the sand. Time is short to get with the program. If the extremely limited approach of the 2011 GA of the PCC with regards to the celebration of Communion in the rural setting is the best that can be managed, the PCC's future is not all that bright. In my library I have a copy of the Eucharlogian from 19th Century Scotland that has resources that can enable lay people to rightly celebrate Communion and Baptism. I have a copy of a similar book from the same time period from the Methodist Church in Canada, designed for lay readers. The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand has had non-clergy presiding over Communion for over 20 years and Baptism for over 10 years, and in the words of Bruce Fraser, "The sky has not fallen." World wide, Presbyterian and other denominations have made similar moves. Honestly, how hard can this be for us?

5. Mission

The Apostolic Church existed on the margins of society, often functioning underground. It was a counter culture community. It did everything possible to differentiate itself from the practices of society that went against its core beliefs. In that sense, it was a prophetic community.

That being said, the Apostolic Church had a definite missional stance towards culture as well. This missional stance towards culture expressed itself in evangelistic ways, often at great cost. New Testament communities of faith were an incarnational-sending people. It was the mission of each community of faith to go out to the people. They witnessed for Christ in the midst of the dominant culture and it often cost them their lives.

There was a drift away from this with the coming of the age of Christendom. The church became perceived as central to society and the surrounding culture. Its

approach to culture became attractional and extractional, i.e. 'come to us' and 'we will take from you.' The results have been devastating to the church's mission.

Today, perhaps since the Enlightenment period, as the church has struggled to continue in its Christendom mode, it often bends over backwards to reflect the dominant or popular culture, even when it is blatantly non biblical. In recent years in the PCC we have often dared to call this cultural conformity "justice ministry." And we have created a Social Action Handbook to guide congregations in how to think and act to conform to society. If that's not enough, this Social Action Handbook is now quoted as a source of official church doctrine with regards to many issues. This is just plain weird, especially when there is a Church Doctrine Committee tasked with doing this very thing on a biblical basis.

Recently I listened as a leader within the PCC said in the meeting of a church court, "Mission is a pejorative word." Certainly it would seem so. We have all but dropped the word from usage at the national church level years ago. Have we become a church that is totally sold out to the dominant culture, so entrenched in an attractional mode as a survival strategy that we no longer have a missional stance towards culture? It would seem so. Congregations seldom have any real active mission in their own community. And mission support for beyond the particular community of the actual congregation is so buried within Presbyterian Sharing that it pretty much feels like a church tax rather than mission involvement and support. It all seems to have become so attractional and extractional and abstarct.

In the Post Christendom Church, faith communities will return to life on the fringe of society, return to being counter cultural, return to being missional/sending communities. Faith communities will once again become proactive with regards to mission in their own communities, both prophetically as well as evangelically. This prophetic activity will not be guided by a denominational Social Action Handbook but by a reading and interpretation of Scripture done in small hermeneutical circles at the local level. Mission work will actually be done locally to convert people to Christ. And beyond the community of direct influence, faith communities will insist upon direct involvement with the mission work that they support abroad. Presbyterian Sharing in the PCC will have to change or cease to exist. It will have to become primarily a linking and facilitating organization rather than a money collection and dispersal agency of the church. It's work will become that of encouraging and facilitating direct involvement of faith communities with mission at the local level and beyond. (Oh man! And you and I are soon about to retire Gordon?)

6. Conclusion

The Church of Christendom has never been very good at embracing change; it is usually forced into it. In the Western World the force for change is almost always economic pressure. Since small churches will experience that kind of pressure first, and since most small churches are in rural and semi rural settings, the front line for the birth of a Post Christendom Church in the PCC will be in rural and semi rural settings. The rural church will be the proving ground for virtually all the

changes I have alluded to. In this sense, the rural church is on the forefront of the exciting reforms I envisage Christ to be about in the PCC. But here is the thing. The courts of the church, the national church offices and the colleges are going to have to make some important decisions very quickly. Either they recognize the need for radical change and support it, or they will be simply ignored. I fear it is the latter that is happening. From the perspective of a dawning Post Christendom Church in rural Canada, the courts of the church, church offices and the colleges are rapidly becoming irrelevant. Their attempts at change are too small, too slow and way too conservative.

Blessings and best wishes

Dave Webber