

Non-Conformist Ecclesiologies

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“Non-conformist churches” may be described as Christian social movements that have adopted a model of church life which is at variance with the practices, governance and self-image of a (usually self-claimed) “normative” church. That is usually a congregationally based model in which the congregation (and not a bishop, council or clergy) is viewed as the *sine qua non* of ecclesial existence. This serves to contain, defend and nurture religious movements that:

1. are centered upon particular beliefs and practices (e.g. Unitarians and Fundamentalists),
2. have doctrinal beliefs which privilege the position of laity (e.g., Quakers, Congregationalists and Baptists) and
3. emphasize religious experiences of the believer (Charismatic or Pentecostal Christians).

“Non-conformist ecclesiologies” are the theological reflections, groundings and identities of those communities and their practices. They are the reflections upon ecclesial experiences, and as such are the “third act” to the (first act) of the experience of Christians in community and the “second act” of guiding theological meta-theories which for them emerged most strongly in the Protestant Reformation: the priesthood of all believers, the importance of a direct relationship with God (rather than the church serving as an intermediary), God’s covenant of grace, Jesus’ call for discipleship, some (highly varying) degree of Biblical Restorationism (practicing church the way it is perceived to be done in the New Testament), the experience and practice of human liberation and the experience of the Holy Spirit. The modern “children” of the Reformation movements include evangelicalism, social action-based liberalism, Pentecostalism and liberation theologies, all of which shape the way contemporary churches understand and practice “being church”. If the practices of being “church” do not precede formal ecclesiologies, then minimally they exist in a hermeneutical circle of belief, practice and theological reflection. More strongly put, an examination of non-conformist ecclesiologies show that for these Christian communities, practice precedes ecclesiological theory.¹

¹ This differs from the traditional method of inquiry of examining theology by studying theologians, as exemplified by such different and accomplished theologians as Avery Dulles,

The term “non-conformist” is a misnomer in two senses: first in that it describes a variety of Christian movements which in their view seek to be conformist, albeit with the desires of God rather than those of a flawed society and established church. It is this ‘divine conformity’ that has energized their creation, shaped their form and challenges their future. The second sense in which this title is a misnomer is that in many parts of the world it is the ‘non-conformist’ churches which are in fact the dominant (and fastest growing) models of Christianity. Sociologically, in North America religion is lived at the ground level in a ‘de facto congregationalism’ in which people presume to join congregations, temples and mosques even when that very Protestant model is elsewhere foreign to the religion.² The mega-church phenomenon in the United States and elsewhere and the spread of entrepreneurial churches have added a new dimension to the ‘normativity of non-conformity’.

This chapter will examine six “ideal types” of nonconformist ecclesiologies that will help the reader identify and understand the varieties, blessings and perils of the non-conformist experience of being church. Some religious communities are nonconformist in some areas but not others (for example, the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian traditions). Arguably, others once were non-conformist but are no longer so (the United Methodist Church in North America).³ The selected expressions of non-conformity do not exhaust the field but do reflect paradigmatic experiences of ecclesial life. Each expression will be analyzed through a presentation of 1. Introduction and Identity, 2. Key concepts, 3. Social implications, 4. Ecumenical life and 4. Contemporary theologians. Having surveyed an sample of non-conformist ecclesiologies, I will then “take a step back” to view what the experience on non-

Models of the Church, New York, Doubleday, 1978 and H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper and Row, 1951. While maintaining an interpretive lens shaped by the great theologians, Roger Haight’s *Christian Community in Context*, New York, Continuum, 2005, restores a measure of balance between theologian and context.

² R. Stephen Warner, “The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration.” *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, edited by James Wind and James Lewis. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 1994, pp. 54-99.

³ 18th century Methodism had distinctive conceptions of what it meant to be Christian, the purpose of the church and the social ethic of Christians in the world. Today this is only incidentally so. See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005.

conformist ecclesiologies has to share with the wider church(es). The movements examined will be, in historical order, Anabaptist, Congregationalist, Baptist, Restorationist, an ecumenical church and the “new paradigm church” movement.

Historic expressions: Anabaptists

The “Anabaptist” movements emerged out of the same social, political, religious and economic ferment out of which came the rest of Reformation churches in the late 15th and 16th centuries:⁴ increasing literacy and affordable books, spiritual awakening and the growing wealth. From these “social seedbeds” came dozens of spiritual renewal movements that were born and evolved, either vanishing into the whispers of history, flourishing or being crushed by the reaction of the established church and states. The “radical reformers” of the early Reformation accepted the calls of their contemporary Luther for the rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers, justification by faith through grace, the primacy of the Bible over the traditions of the church and the importance of personal faith. They wanted to go much further than Luther was willing to go, calling not for reforming the existing church, but for its abandonment and the restoration of a new church modeled on what they saw as the practices of the early church as described in the teachings of the New Testament. Out of this new experience of ‘church’ came a new understanding of what being ‘church’ meant: a fellowship of believers gathered by religious belief and practice in a particular congregation with a focus upon obedience to the teachings of Christ. This was a stark contrast with the ‘Christendom’ model of a universal, national, city or state church to which all owed allegiance. It was this different gestalt of being church that guided reforms, energized participants and aroused murderous persecution.⁵

Such churches were different: constituted by people who had denied the legitimacy of their first baptism as infants and sought baptism as adults. In Switzerland, Michael Sattler wrote

⁴ See chapter 4 of this volume, *Ecclesiology and the Reformation*.

⁵ Franklyn Littell offers the classical understanding of the origins of the Anabaptist movements, to be found in *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, Boston: Starr King Press, 1958. His approach has been supplanted by James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull and Klaus Deppermann “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 49, 1975, pp. 83-121 and Thomas Heilke, “Theological and Secular Meta-Narratives of Politics: Anabaptist Origins Revisited (Again)” *Modern Theology*, Vol. 13:2, April 1997, pp. 227-252.

the Schleitheim Confession in 1527 defining the practices of what were to be called the Swiss Brethren:

1. believer's baptism in which only those who had freely come to faith would be baptized
2. the ban (disciplining those who departed from the ways of faith (i.e., sinners) by shunning them and not calling upon the military powers of the state or church to enforce church doctrine),
3. communion in both kinds,
4. separation from the sinful world as much as possible,
5. clergy who will serve as pastors to guide and teach their flock and not rule over them,
6. pacifism and
7. the eschewal of oaths.⁶

The most enduring theologian of the early Anabaptists was Menno Simons (1496-1561), a Dutch priest who converted to Anabaptism in 1535 after experiencing increasing discomfort with the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass, the primacy of church tradition over Scripture in Catholicism and, ultimately, issues of baptism. He was part of second wave of Anabaptists and was instrumental in recapitulating the religious beliefs of Anabaptists while also reigning in perceived spiritual extremists who carried their religious perceptions beyond what the reason of the day could accept (open marriage, communal ownership of property, spiritualism and violent apocalypticism). His writings serve as the primary theological documents of early Anabaptism.

The followers of Menno, today's Mennonites, continue to practice a believer's fellowship model of church with a strong emphasis on non-violence and as a contemporary extension of those beliefs, are well known for their missionary service programs throughout the world through the Mennonite Central Committee.

It is the grounding concept of church as the fellowship of believers that must remain distinct in a sinful world that has remained the dominant influence of the Anabaptist movements. Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder's The Politics of Jesus (1972) argued that simply being a Christian in an era of violence, greed and oppression ought to be a strong political statement and that authentic discipleship was more in keeping with the teachings of Jesus than were contemporary just war theories. Stanley Hauerwas was a student of Yoder's and has continued to articulate the call for Christian communities to be an alternative community in the

⁶ Found in Haight, op cit, p 225.

world, defined not by how well they enable people to fit into society but by their fidelity to Jesus Christ.⁷

While Anabaptist churches have always been small groups of intent believers, through their legacy of pacifism, service and consistent theological articulation, that movement is arguably more influential today than ever before. The conception of church as an alternative community to contemporary culture has found fresh homes in a wide range of theological perspectives. With popularity comes fresh challenges: liberation perspectives which challenge how the historic alternative community has itself been an oppressor (of minority positions, women, people who are gays and lesbians) and, more significantly, whether the very popularity of being an alternative community will mask how small a difference is often actually created.

Historic Expressions: Congregationalists

Congregationalists emerged out of the Puritan movement of the English Reformation as an attempt to purify and reform church and society. chiefly along the lines articulated by John Calvin. The Puritans who evolved into Congregationalists rather than Presbyterians differed from more orthodox Calvinists in a stronger emphasis upon the role of experience in theology, the understanding that faith could be expressed and judged but never compelled through creeds or mandated covenants and the firm conviction that individual congregations, although bound with other congregations in covenant, were themselves an independent and full expression of the visible church. Their ecclesiological foundation was not “independency” as an end in itself, but the belief in a direct and accountable relationship between God and the individual believer. The church was expressive of that relationship, not an intermediary between God and believer. Congregationalists differed from the Anabaptists in that they did not understand the church as needing to separate from society or the state church but were instead called to reform both. They rejected rebaptism and practiced the baptism of infants, following the teachings of John Calvin that baptism was to be understood as an expression of the covenant of grace. The significance of Congregationalism is threefold: they gave the fullest expression of ecclesiological understanding of the congregation, their experiments in church and societal governance had important ramifications for the understanding of both the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1989.

establishment of democracy and the mediating forms by which they sought to reform society are continued today by their religious tradition, institutions and resulting moral presumptions.

The congregational conceptions of what the church ought to be emerged out of the practices of reforming and “purifying” congregations during the late 16th and early 17th century English Reformation. They may be divided between those who sought to withdraw from the established church of their day (John Smyth (see below), and at times, John Robinson) and those who wished not separation but reformation and renewal (William Ames, Henry Jacobs and at times, John Robinson). The Cambridge Platform of the Congregational churches of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1648) identified the movement’s broad consensus of the church: “A congregational church is by the institution of Christ a part of the militant visible church, consisting of a company of saints by calling, united into one body by a holy covenant, for the public worship of God, and the mutual edification of one another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.”⁸ Congregationalists were people of “faith, freedom and fellowship.”⁹ Like the churches of the Anabaptist movement, the congregation is considered to be a fellowship of believers who had experienced the grace of God in their lives and who sought to live disciplined lives of faith in response. Each believer was responsible for their own relationship with God, but that freedom was a “founded freedom” established by God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Church covenants, and the covenants between congregations, served to hold the respective entities together while at the same time promoting the freedom of each. Such covenants worked on three levels: they reflected:

- Gods covenant of grace given in Jesus Christ’s atoning life, death and resurrection;
- God’s covenant with the church in which the church sought to do God’s will, and
- The individuals of the church covenanting one with another for the support of the church and its mission and their own mutual admonition and support.¹⁰

⁸ Chapter 2, Paragraph #6, found in Williston Walker’s *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, New York, Pilgrim Press, 1991, reprint of 1893 original, p. 194ff.

⁹ Daniel T. Jenkins, *Congregationalism: A Restatement*, New York: Harper p. 40.

¹⁰ Classically put by John Smyth in his “congregational period” before he developed into a Baptist and then ‘proto-pentecostal’. See Haight, op cit, pp. 245 ff.

The classic creeds (the Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasius Creed) were viewed at best as testimonies but not tests of faith and at worst as human contrivances that stood between the believer and God. The mark of a Christian was not someone who might make such a confession but rather the active covenanting and living out of the costs and joys of discipleship. The most famous example of a church covenant is the Salem Covenant of 1629, which affirms simply:

We covenant with the lord and one with an other and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.¹¹

Such church covenants served as the models for social compacts in North America, by which new colonies legitimated their own self rule on the basis the free consent of their citizens rather than the divine right of kings. Such churches were very focused upon the individual faith experiences but were surprisingly well equipped to adapt to address broader, societal issues, albeit not through congregations but through established 'instrumentalities' of the church, the first 'non-profit organizations' of the modern era. Note the rhetoric: mission organizations were instruments of the church, not the church itself. Instrumentalities were formed to address religious needs for missionary work and social reform at home and abroad. The logic of congregational autonomy led to an emphasis upon the creation of "self supporting, self-governing and self- extension" by new churches in mission fields.¹² The emphasis upon the Church as a collection of congregations meant that there were a great deal more leadership positions available for indigenous church members, and Congregational churches provided for greater leadership possibilities for non Euro-American leaders in nations that were colonized by England or America.¹³ The empowerment of indigenous populations was often seen as contrary to the interests of colonial powers, which often led to governmental curtailment of Congregational missionary activities. A greater problem was that mission was seen in Congregational churches not as an expression of being church but as a consequence for the calling of some to do God's work. This was one of the great tensions within the congregational

¹¹ Walker, op cit, p. 116.

¹² Francis M. DuBose, *Classics of Christian Missions*, Nashville, Broadman Press, 1979.

¹³ See Juanita De Barros' "Congregationalism and Afro-Guianese Autonomy" in *the CERLAC Working Paper Series*, July, 1998.

system, as to whether churches should be engaged in mission or rather focused upon the worship of God.

In the United States, the Congregationalists did not organize themselves into a formal denomination until the 1871 after several failed plans of union and/or cooperation with their fellow Calvinists, the Presbyterians. Congregationalists in America moved steadily away from the orthodox Calvinism of their ancestors, so that by 1913 they could affirm in the Kansas City Statement of Faith:

We hold it to be the mission of the Church of Christ to proclaim the gospel to all mankind, exalting the worship of the one true god, and laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood.”¹⁴

The social gospel had found a home in Congregational churches! Significantly, this statement of faith was part of a new constitution and by-laws put in to effect in order to create greater coordination and cooperation between local churches, regional associations and the various independent national agencies and instrumentalities of the still new denomination.

Congregationalists have been active participants in the ecumenical movement, joining both great ecumenical councils of the 20th century, councils of churches and being active participants in church merger discussions. So long as the autonomy of congregations was secured, there was little to be lost and much to be gained. That caveat, however, proved to be a major issue for other ecumenical partners. The 20th century’s call for cooperation in mission, the neo-orthodox recovery of Scripture and the press for ending the scandal of Christian division proved to be powerful motivators for organic union in the United States (United Church of Christ, 1957, see below), United Church of Japan (1941), Church of South India (1947), the United Reformed Church of Great Britain (1972) and the United Church of Canada (1925), United Church of Christ of the Philippines (1948) and other united and uniting churches. In some cases (Church of South India), congregational autonomy was surrendered to the more pressing needs for common witness and mission. Not all Congregational churches have been in favor of organic union, however, with many in the “continuing congregational” movement opting to remain independent. Today such churches remain independent for theological reasons, or because they are able to sustain their desired activities of fellowship and mission without formal relationships

¹⁴ Walker, op cit. p. 599.

with other congregations.

P.T. Forsyth was the preeminent Congregational theologian of the early 20th Century,¹⁵ He described the Church as comprising a “Holy Spirituality” revealed from the Cross of Christ. The freedoms of Congregationalism (freedom of conscience, congregational autonomy) were seen in this light as being “founded freedoms”, founded upon and in response to the Cross.¹⁶ Douglas Horton (1891-1968), the General Secretary of the Congregational Christian Churches in the United States, was centrally important both in the recovery of Puritan theologians but also in clarifying the issues of the tradition as it explored unity with other ecclesiological forms in particular the division between those who saw the congregation as purely the location for Christian formulation and worship and those who saw it has having a duty for mission in the world, and those who viewed the essence of congregationalism as independency from other churches and those who saw the tradition as engaged in a covenantal relationships with other churches (see United Church of Christ, below). Horton was an early translator of Karl Barth’s work to the American scene and a leader in ecumenism throughout the 20th Century.¹⁷ While other academic theologians were members of Congregational churches (H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, for example), the theological work of the past century was focused upon the ethical and faith demands of wider society and the “Great Church” rather than the confessional needs of congregational churches. Alan P.F. Sell, Theological Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has written a spirited defense of the “Congregational way” as a positive contribution to the ecumenical movement, especially in the English context, focusing upon the church as a gathered community of believers that is gifted by God’s grace to be visible saints, orderly in conduct and catholic in spirit.¹⁸ Gabriel Fackre writes a “narrative theology” of the

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *The Church, the Gospel and Society*, London, Independent Press, 1962.

¹⁶ Samuel J. Mikolaski, editor, *The Creative Theology of P.T. Forsyth*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1969. Marvin W. Anderson, editor, *The Gospel and Authority: A P.T. Forsyth Reader*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1971.

¹⁷ See Douglas Horton, *Toward an Undivided Church*, New York, Association Press, 1967. *Congregationalism: A Study in Church Polity*, London, Independent Press, 1952.

¹⁸ Alan P.F. Sell, *Saints: Visible, Orderly and Catholic: The Congregational Idea of the Church*, Allison Park, Pennsylvania, Pickwick Publications, 1986.

church out of Congregational orientation (such narrative theology, while appropriating and expressing the historic faith, is a local endeavor).¹⁹

Today the Congregational form has spread around the world, but the Congregational substance has taken a willing back seat to the needs of ecumenicity, mission and witness. Time will tell if this was a wise move.

Historical Expressions: Baptist Churches

Contemporary Baptist movements had their genesis in two social movements: the elements of the English Reformation most influenced by Biblical Restorationism (pre-eminently the English proto-pentecostal John Smyth) and the evangelism campaigns of the Great Awakening (a period of spiritual renewal in the mid 18th century, chiefly American, led by preachers such as the Jonathon Edwards, George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers characterized by preaching aimed at awakening the religious life through conversion). Three religious presumptions are inherent to the movements: churches must be modeled upon the church structures of the Bible, the mission of the church is expressed in the Great Commission, to create new disciples for Christ and an individualism reflective of the emphasis upon personal religious repentance and faith. In one form or another, individuals having the ‘born again experience’ are expected to live their lives differently than before (with a historic emphasis upon personal righteousness reflected in sober living). Christian discipleship, and hence participation in the life of the church, is expected to make a difference in the believer’s life.

The doctrine of the church is founded upon Jesus’ promise in Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in there among them.” The Church is constituted by the presence of Christ present through the believers’ faith and discipleship. The church is known by its obedience to the will of God, constituted by covenantal association in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, right practices of Biblical preaching and the correct administration of the “ordinances” of Christ (chiefly believer’s baptism but also a Zwinglian understanding of communion), and the Biblical organization of the church: the congregation as the core organizational unit, clergy limited to those called to preach and rule and deacons and elders for the organization and administration of the ministries of the church. While the covenantal understanding created a system where, after evidence of spiritual rebirth, there was

¹⁹ Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1978.

room and expectation for considerable theological diversity, in the late 20th century some of the larger Baptist movements (chiefly the Southern Baptist Churches) explicitly specified what had earlier been presumed: a mandate for the literal understanding of Scripture. This is by no means universal within the broad range of Baptist churches, which have included the founders of the American “Social Gospel” movement (Walter Rauschenbusch) and the champion of American theological liberalism, Harvey Cox. Baptist theologians, as with Baptist churches, “multiply by division.”

African American Baptist churches present a special case of ecclesiological development that has been particularly significant both in and outside of the Baptist movement.²⁰ Organized first under slavery and then under conditions of racial, legal and economic oppression that still echo with pain and suffering in American life, the “Black Church” was the only social institution in which African Americans could have control over their own organizations.²¹ Significant for purposes of ecclesiological development are:

1. The conception of the church as a community whose purpose includes participating in the liberating work of God from sin, including personal, social and systemic expressions of alienation from God.
2. Church organization as an entrepreneurial activity, in which anyone who experiences a call to ministry may be ordained by a congregation and then seek to start “their own” church.
3. Church practices as seedbeds of creativity and innovation in worship, organization and doctrine.

James Cone (*Black Theology and Black Power*, 1969, *God of the Oppressed*, 1975, *For My People*, 1984) is the most prominent African American theologian today, bringing together a historical recovery of the practices of liberation experienced in many African-American churches, critical theory and the ethical call for the Black Church to be agents of liberation for all but especially African peoples.²² Marcia Y. Riggs adds an important voice in how women’s

²⁰ See chapter 24 of this volume, *Black Ecclesiologies*.

²¹ African American churches are not all Baptist nor are confined to nonconformist ecclesiology. Various kinds of Baptist churches predominate, however, and elements of Baptist practice have a deep resonance throughout most African American communities.

²² James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, New York: Seabury, 1969. *A Black theology of Liberation*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1970. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1984.

organizations in the historic Black Church worked in ways that may now be seen as liberative under conditions of oppression.²³

Considerable diversity does exist with the Baptist movements. While the world's most famous Baptist, evangelist Billy Graham, is known for his determined focus upon an individual's hearing and responding to the grace of God in the experience of spiritual rebirth without explicit social justice, an earlier generation of Baptists were leaders in the American "social gospel" of the late 19th and 20th century, which held that a genuine spiritual awakening had to entail work for social justice. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the American civil rights anchored in the use of Baptist churches as organizing centers. The church as a community of human liberation was harnessed to be a community for changing society for human liberation. The social ethical positions of the largest Baptist churches focus upon issues of personal behavior (don't smoke, don't drink or use non-medicinal drugs, etc.), often ignoring societal issues altogether either as an impediment to the essential work of conversion or contrary to the conversionist strategy by which social change occurs with the conversion of individuals.²⁴

This diversity is also reflected within the ecumenical movement. Baptist leaders were early participants in ecumenical mission work and participated in the creation of several of the united and uniting churches (especially Church of North India and the United Church of Christ of Japan). The largest Baptist body, the Southern Baptist Convention, however, while supportive of shared mission and evangelism programs, is opposed to much of the work of the modern ecumenical movement as hostile to Biblical representative Christianity. In the words of R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The only genuine basis of true Christian unity is a unity on the teachings of the Bible as commonly accepted and commonly understood." Southern Baptists are committed to the unity of the churches, but this will remain a spiritual unity until there can be a joining based on common convictions which include free church polity, local church autonomy, and regenerate church membership. In Mohler's words, the ecumenical "conviction of the

²³ Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*; (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press) 1994.

²⁴ While this has often meant that justice issues were completely ignored or worse, in some cases this strategy for social action has worked well. See Heidi Rolland Unruh, Ronald J. Sider, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Convention is *cooperation without compromise*.”²⁵

While the beliefs of the largest non-conformist church can not be ignored or minimized, such sentiments are not dominant in the academic community, where the Baptist understanding of being church has in recent years enjoyed a renewal and recovery. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann adopted a Baptist ecclesiology in his 1977 opus *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*.²⁶ Writing in the context of European church decline, Moltmann adopts a believer’s model of the church as a means to avoid becoming “alienated from its foundation” under conditions of modernity. Such a move would allow authentic solidarity with people who are alienated from it: the poor, women and other peoples who are oppressed. The most eminent Euro-American theologian currently working within the framework of the larger Baptist movement is Miroslav Volf whose 1998 *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* compares the “Free Church” understanding of church with both the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulous and the now Pope Benedict XVI (then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger).²⁷ Volf grounds his ecclesiology in a historical recovery of the work of John Smyth, who serves as a “proto-pentecostal” figure able to both unite the ecclesiological foundations of Congregational, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and introduce the doctrine of the Holy Spirit into the conception of the church. This allows Volf to move into contemporary discussions of Trinitarian theology and grounding a free church ecclesiology in a dialogical and non-hierarchical image of the Trinity.

The Baptist experience of being church remains the most contentious, creative and self-confident expressions of ecclesiology. The differences within the Baptist world are often greater than the unity of tradition that grounds them.

Historic Expression: Restorationism

A significant issue for all churches is the question of what extent the models and practices of the New Testament church ought to be models and practices for churches of today.

²⁵ “The Southern Baptist Convention and the Issue of Interdenominational Relationships” found at <http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/FidelitasRead.php?article=fidel052>

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977. He adds a much stronger conception of the Holy Spirit in *The Source of life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* London, SCM Press, 1997.

²⁷ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997.

The Restorationist movement in ecclesiology represents one side of that balance, where the task of today's churches is to model as clearly as is possible the models found in the New Testament. Ostensibly a simple reading of the Bible that privileges common-sense understanding above intellectual sophistication, the movement found its origins in highly educated pastors (Alexander Campbell) grounded in the presumptions of the philosophy of John Locke which emphasized the capacity of each individual to make rational decisions based upon the individual's best interests.²⁸ The movement flourished in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening among people who were disenchanted with the anti-democratic ethos of Calvinism (e.g., the doctrine of predestination and the complete depravity of humanity). In contrast, American pastors like Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone read from their Bibles a description of the church:

That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and give obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else, as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.²⁹

From this Campbell delineated twelve additional propositions, summarized as emphasizing:

1. the unity of the Church of Christ
2. the supreme authority of the scriptures
3. the special authority of the New Testament
4. the fallacy of human creeds,
5. the essential brotherhood of all who love Christ and try to follow him and that if human innovations can be removed from the church, the followers of Christ will unite upon the scriptural platform.

Taking no name other than Christian, the Restorationists sought to model their worship upon what they read in the Bible: weekly communion services led by lay leaders and not clergy, believer's baptism and sermons rooted in the Bible while suspicious of theology. There were divisions within the movement over whether the call to ecumenicism meant cooperation with churches that did not accept the Restorationist principles and whether the primacy of the Bible precluded the ethos of modernism and liberalism or could be maintained within this new

²⁸ Alan P.F. Sell, *John Locke and the 18th Century Divines*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1997.

²⁹ From the "Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington" found in Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, St. Louis, Bethany Press, 1975

philosophical system. There are three primary groups. The congregations of the Church of Christ, probably the largest of the three main groups of Restorationist Christianity, conceive themselves as a movement and not a denomination but if anything an “anti-denomination” (membership statistics are estimates since they refuse to count). They are most noted for the absence of musical instruments in their worship. Their inherent anti-modernism and resulting anti-intellectualism found fertile soil with many that led to the easy acceptance of American fundamentalism. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) combine the traditions of the Restorationist movement with the practices and values of mainstream Christianity. Members of the independent Christian Churches (non-Disciples of Christ) see the Disciples as having left the Restorationist movement through both their organization as a denomination in the 1920s and 30s and through their openness to liberal and modernist influences. These Christian Churches are noted for their sponsorship of Bible Colleges and academies as alternatives to secular universities and schools.

The social ethics of the movement depend most crucially not on the ecclesiological principles of the church, but upon their stance in acceptance of or in opposition to modernism. The Disciples are the most liberal and hence the most likely to engage in broader social issues. The other two tend to be highly individualistic and view social justice as a matter of personal righteousness. With a touch of irony, the stances of the churches towards education lead the Disciples to be a church in favor of the poor, while the other two are (larger) churches of the poor.

While independent Christian Churches and members of the Church of Christ are open in theory to the ecumenical movement, their strict understanding of the essence of the Church as following a particular form precludes their participation in an actual movement of genuinely different churches. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), despite being the smallest of the three Restorationist churches, has contributed significant leadership to the American and world ecumenical movement. After a long period of working cooperatively with the United Church of Christ, the two denominations formed a Common Global Ministries Board in 1996. A long period of discussion about organic merger led to the 1989 decision to adopt “full communion” but not organic merger. Bi-lateral discussions have been held with the Vatican and Disciples personnel were active in the work of the National Council of Churches, USA and the World Council of Churches. But it is significant that it is the smallest branch of the Restorationist

movement that has been the most engaged in the ecumenical movement while the other two expressions, truer to a purer (though perhaps naïve?) interpretation of Campbell's teachings, have flourished.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is most noted for its Biblical scholars and practical theologians. Given the primacy given to the Bible and the latent suspicion of intellectualism that is not surprising. Michael Kinnamon is a leading ecumenical theologian, having served on staff of the World Council of Churches's Faith and Order Commission and now teaching at a United Church of Christ seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.³⁰ Paul A. Crow, Jr. was a central leader in American ecumenical work for over twenty years in his capacity as the Disciples of Christ's ecumenical officer.

Contemporary Expressions: The United Church of Christ, U.S.A.

By now it has become obvious to the reader that all churches have glorious traditions and identities. These traditions and identities are shaped (more than we like to admit) by realities grounded in the forces of culture, human experience and the demands and possibilities of Christian discipleship. This vortex of experience and possibility brings twin challenges to ecclesiological reflection: the restatement of particular tradition as authentic to contemporary existence and also its reshaping in the face of new difficulties.

Thus the 20th Century has seen the restatement of (Protestant Reformed) neo-orthodox Biblical theology that challenged all traditions to take a fresh look at the Scriptures and the meaning of the Christ event for these times. Liberation theologies challenged the complicity of Christian theology, especially ecclesiology, in the complicity of theology in the oppression of the poor, women and people understood as "not normal". The ecumenical movement raised with fresh passion the challenge of the "scandal of the church's divisions" in the face of both the needs of the world and Jesus' prayer that "all may be one." Beginning with the World Missionary Conference of 1910, the "Life and Work" movement challenged all churches to justify theological division in the face of what was seen as the Biblical mandate for unity.³¹

³⁰ See Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How it has Been Impoverished by its Friends*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003. Kinnamon has also edited with Brian Cope the essential compendium of key texts of the ecumenical movement, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1997.

³¹ See chapter 22 of this volume, *Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*.

The work of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr both reflects and guides the theological spirit of the age.³² His 1929 *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* critiqued the American denominational system as more a reflection of social class than theological beliefs (which primarily served as ideological legitimization). *Christ and Culture* (1951) presented a highly influential, even paradigmatic understanding of religious and ethical existence. The different Christian approaches to culture were expressed in five “ideal types” with Niebuhr advocating a “Christ transforming culture” approach in which an authentic Christian response seeks to change contemporary culture to ways fitting God’s call. The call for Christians to be agents of social change was clear. This was written at a time in which American churches more often than not reflected the racial, class and political biases of the culture. Niebuhr called for the church to be a kind of social pioneer in the transformation of itself and society.

Out of this ethos came the aforementioned 1957 creation of the United Church of Christ (U.S.A.), the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. The former were the 1934 merger of the (predominantly Lutheran) Evangelical Synod of North America and the (German) Reformed Church. The resulting denomination was the first merger in the United States reflecting different ethnicities, polities, and ecclesiological backgrounds. Significantly, the Church of South India (1947), United Church of Christ of the Philippines (1948) and the United Church of Christ of Japan (1941) both predate and reflect the ecumenical spirit of the age.³³

This merger professed continuity with “the” Protestant reformers and assured congregational polity, but left the important theological formulations for future work. This somewhat daring move was designed to force the new church to formulate its identity based on faithfulness to Christ in the present age rather than on fidelity to theological tradition. Four

³² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, Henry Holt, 1929. *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper and Row, 1951. With James Gustafson and Daniel Day Williams, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry* New York, Harper and Brothers, 1956.

³³ For fuller discussions, see Louis F. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, New York, Pilgrim Press, 1977; *United and Uniting: The Meaning of An Ecclesial Journey*, New York: United Church Press, 1987; and Randi Jones Walker, *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*, Cleveland:, United Church Press, 2005.

themes have emerged in the denomination's emerging ecclesiology:

1. Continued congregational polity in which congregations have the right to call (select) their pastoral leadership and set their own policies and practices.
2. Understanding mission ("Missio Dei") to be joining God's mission on earth.³⁴
3. Strengthening covenantal relationships between congregations and church structures rooted in the broader mission of the church.
4. Sense of the Church as "becoming the Beloved Community" of Christ which is characterized by radical inclusiveness of previously marginalized groups.

The adherence to the perceived mission of God for human liberation from the forces of sin has led the denomination in pioneering work in Civil Rights for African-Americans, women and now, through a congregational self designation process, being "Open and Affirming" of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans-gendered. The radicality of this work for justice was buffered for people who opposed work on human liberation on the grounds that the national church did not speak for the local church, but under the conditions of congregational polity it spoke to the local church and to the world, just as the congregations were encouraged to do. If a congregation did not choose to participate or support these programs, it did not need to do so. This strategy for both holding the church together while addressing controversial issues had worked well enough for the Congregationalists, but it remained to be seen how well it would work as this new church worked out its 'future work'.

The United Church of Christ, as might be expected of a church whose motto is "that all may be one", has been an enthusiastic participant in the modern ecumenical movement. It was expected in its creation that this would be the first step toward the eventual re-uniting of all Protestant churches in the United States. Organic union, however, has been a step too far for most denominations, especially when key ecclesiological issues are addressed directly (e.g., is each congregation a full expression of the presence of Christ? Does the Church require a broader representation of churches and people? Can bishops claim an apostolic succession, or is that succession reserved for the apostolic faith in the crucified and risen Lord?)

Internal critics within the denomination have noted an "ecclesiological deficit" within the church, resulting in a denomination that at times has seemed to some as not knowing who it was (or perhaps more significantly, not liking what it was becoming). The UCC was challenged in ecumenical discussions as to whether it was a true church or "merely" an alliance of churches.

³⁴ See chapter 37 of this volume, *Ecclesiology and World Mission/Missio Dei*.

The *Missio Dei* identification of a church in mission in the world worked very well for the national mission agencies of the church, but were a much harder fit for congregations organized as fellowships of believers, leading to a sense of disconnection between the national agencies of the church and its member congregations. New understandings of being church could both not be ignored, and would only slowly be appropriated by the members of congregations.

The denomination has suffered some from the gap between the theology articulated by the leadership and the beliefs of people in congregations. The leadership has espoused being a multi-cultural and multi-racial church. But since religion has a social function of legitimating ethnic differences in a here-to-now Anglo dominated culture and congregational polity presumes that each church is by definition a freely gathered community, under conditions of choice most congregations are mono-cultural and mono-racial. Covenants, while talked about, remain in practice elusive (and suffer from the lack of consensus on what the foundational covenant, of God with creation, is all about).

Illustrative of the growing pains of ecclesiological identity are a series of television ads which celebrated the United Church of Christ as welcoming people who may not have felt welcome in other denominations. Included in the ad, amongst pictures of many different people, were several couples of gay men or lesbian women. While the advertisements were banned from the major television networks as being too controversial, they enjoyed great visibility in national news debates. Missing from those debates was an important ecclesiological point: if the identity of a church on such a controversial subject could be made in the public's mind by action of a national media campaign, what good is congregational polity?

The denomination has continued in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches, USA, "Churches Uniting in Christ" (CUIC, an American plan for common ministries without organic merger by the major mainstream Protestant denominations in the United States. More significant than these organizational forums have been the "full communion" discussions and votes between the UCC and its primary ecumenical partners: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA, the Evangelical Church of the Union of Germany (E.K.U.), Lutheran-Reformed dialogue and other ecumenical discussions.

While the denomination has a rich theological heritage, most confessional ecclesiological work is being done by church leaders and not academic theologians. Barbara Brown Zikmund

has led a seven volume history of the theological work of the denomination and its predecessors, *Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*.³⁵ Current work may be found on the denomination's website, www.ucc.org.

Being faithful amidst venerable traditions and new challenges is not an easy task. Valued, even crucial historical understandings may easily be subverted by contemporary issues as expendable losses. They may also prove to be essential to the viability of the church.

Contemporary Expressions: “New Paradigm Churches”

The congregational base of nonconformist ecclesiologies makes organizational innovation comparatively easy: the entire system does not have to change but only one entrepreneurial congregation or pastor. Successful innovations are rapidly adopted by other congregations as they seek to duplicate the success of the innovator. Such “market sensitivity” has been a hallmark of congregationally based religion in America, and has carried with it theological implications for ecclesiology. Sociologist Donald Miller calls such churches “New Paradigm Churches” because of the way that they have become some of the dominant religious communities (and in some areas, expression of the Church) in North America.³⁶

Such innovations have a demographic context: most of the churches which pioneered their use were founded in the 1970s in the United States in regions which were experiencing a high level of in migration from other parts of the United States but which were themselves comparatively “unchurched”. There had been both an emerging counter-cultural religious movement in the 1960s in which youth reshaped Christian practices to fit that era's youth culture, and an organizational response by pastors who sought to establish new congregations with and out of that movement.³⁷ Contemporary innovations of these church pastors reflect an attempt to alleviate the cultural alienation that, they argued, separated people from the church. From that came the “Seeker Church” phenomenon in which the practices and expressed theology

³⁵ See especially Barbara Brown Zikmund and Frederick Trost, editors, *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ: United and Uniting*, Volume 7, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005

³⁶ Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

³⁷ Miller, op cit.

of the church is reshaped with an eye to fitting the religious needs (and biases) of the local population. This can be done as part of a strategy for conversion, as with the justly famed Willow Creek Community Church where the elimination of Christian symbolism and traditional worship patterns is done as part of a calculated effort to bring people to conversion to Christ (as understood by evangelical Protestantism). The shape of the worship service (no hymns, religious rituals, religious symbolism like crosses) is determined in part by the intended audience. It can also be a part of wholesale cultural subversion, as is argued of “prosperity churches” which organize around the theme of material and spiritual enrichment for believers or where other cultural values are adopted wholesale. I witnessed a church where the preacher argued that they were counter to the (secular) culture and were for the values of patriotism, “the traditional family”, and the American free enterprise system. Usually the cultural proclamation is not so overt, but a number of scholars have pointed to the therapeutic, individualistic and anti-establishment ethos of such “new paradigm churches,” which, while they do cultural repair to the seeming narcissism of American culture, also accept and presume a cultural fit.³⁸

A second cultural innovation championed by many contemporary is the adoption of modern business management techniques for the conception and operation of congregations. Common techniques include the use of marketing as a technique of ecclesiology or the adoption of a particular organization design model to “guide” the organizational structure and operation of congregations. These become expressions of ecclesiology when they shape both operations but also the presumptions as to what a church can and should do. The adoption of a “soft systems” model of organizational design (in which the boundaries of the organization are defined not by geography or formal act of membership but by participation in the life of the church and acceptance of the church’s vision, mission and values) works well for a mission focused congregation but not so well for the less ideologically focused parish or congregation rooted in practices based upon presumptions of being fellowship of believers. Overtly “theologically neutral” organizational models carry implicit theological agendas in the actions they favor and

³⁸ See Miller, op cit, for a scholarly and friendly introduction to the seeker church phenomenon. See Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way*, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1990 for a more critical view. For a hostile examination of church marketing and its implications, see Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing*, Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1997.

identities they create. The classic marketing questions of: “What is our business? Who are our customers? What are their needs?” carry with them theological presumptions the nature of the church (a human enterprise engaged in value exchange by consumers whose loyalty must be won continually won). Proponents argue (rightly, in my view) that such criticisms are overdrawn: churches have always implicitly done this, What is new is simply more creative and adaptive ways of bringing the Gospel to current society. Methods, however, are not value neutral. The dependence upon “cultural fit” by such models leads to a surrendering of a prophetic role for the church to speak Gospel truth to power and a blurring of the values of the Gospel with the values of a particular culture.

The key figures in the New Paradigm Church movement are primarily church pastors and not theologians, although they are well aware of the theological implications of what they are seeking to do. Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Community Church (a Southern Baptist congregation) and the author of *The Purpose Driven Church*,³⁹ was one of the first to successfully adopt contemporary organizational design theory for churches. Bill Hybels, is the founder of Willowcreek Community Church and a pioneer in what he calls “seeker sensitive” churches. William Easum, a United Methodist pastor, popularized and adapted their approaches for a broader range of churches. Not professional theologians but pastoral innovators, they have extended and reshaped particular theological visions in ways that have profoundly shaped the way that Christianity “is done” in America.³⁹

Divine Non-Conformity: Opportunities and Challenges

Non-conforming ecclesiologies have much to commend them. By privileging a comparatively small level of Christian community, they both maintain a normative status for fellowship and discipleship. In principle (but not always in practice) they are able to unite the experience of the individual believer and the work of the church. There are few theological limits placed on what the church may and may not do. Such a doctrine is flexible, adaptive in changing situations and may be quite strong in the face of adversity. It remains the fastest growing part of the Christian community.

³⁹ See Rick Warren’ *The Purpose Driven Church*; Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1995. William Easum, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers: Ministry Anytime, Anywhere by Anyone*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995 and Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1997.

Such success notwithstanding, challenges remain for the non-conformists. The basic starting point of a non-conformist ecclesiology is the church as a fellowship of believers. The experiences of Christian communities would seem to indicate that this is by itself incomplete. It is too easy for a church to remain focused upon itself while looking at God (I see no difference between evangelical, liberal or Pentecostal churches in this regard). Fellowship and belief are incomplete without a mission of love for others.

The sticking point for many “Fellowship of Believers” comes not with the fellowship but the believing part. At a shallow level, fellowship without believing is secularism, not Christianity. At another level, when such fellowships have been particularly vital there has been a clear consensus on what the covenant is between God and humanity and between God and the church. At the very least, most “covenantal churches” lack a consensus on these points and thus lack the ability to mobilize themselves for significant witness in the world.

The challenges of the high or post-modern era have eroded the truth claims of non-conformists as well as other Christian expressions: treasured theological beliefs are shown to be more about social class maintenance, foundational understandings of “what the Bible says” about how the early church lived prove less universal than any tradition would like. More significant than these challenges, however, is a foundational question for ecclesiology: the past century has seen a clear erosion of interest in ecclesiology itself in the face of both massive levels of human need in the developing world and religious restructuring elsewhere. Rather than theological identity, nature and purpose, the (formerly) mainstream churches have been focused upon issues of ethics and mission. Arguably these churches have become more relevant to the issues and less relevant to their members. Is the problem with the mission or the membership? How do we now know who we are? Has ecclesiology become the wrong topic for guiding the lives of real churches?

This is all the more striking when compared with the growth and material success of church movements who have been untroubled by modernity and its questions. The Congregationalists of India may have disappeared into the Church of South India out of self-sacrifice in the advance of Christian mission work, but that did not stop foreign para-church organizations from starting new, independent churches as “their” mission. It is the smallest of the Restorationist and Baptist churches that are the most interested in the ecumenical movement. For the non-conformist social movements there remains twin challenges in the ecumenical age:

how is their experience of faith life giving and saving, and how is the ecumenical movement a part of this life giving and saving experience of faith?

Finally, the key question for non-conforming churches (as well as the conforming churches) remains the same as the definitional puzzle with which this chapter began: conforming with whom? How do we conform today with the desires and delights of our God?