

Chapter 1

SOLID AND LIQUID MODERNITY AND THE CHURCH

The question is whether our churches are part of the problem or part of the solution. When evangelism is discussed in books or at conferences there seems to be a growing appreciation that some version of church is vital for outreach in contemporary culture. Even if the ecclesiastical package offered comes in many forms—youth church, seeker church, church planting, emerging church, purpose-driven church, and so on—the common factor is the belief that church is the solution. The irony is that the search for the relevant church illustrates the extent to which church is still part of the problem. Why do we need to spend so much time and energy developing new forms of church if the ones we have are satisfactory? If church is part of the solution, then it is also part of the problem.

In many ways I share in the growing conviction that evangelism must pay more attention to the church. But it hasn't always been this way. For those engaged in evangelism and youth ministry forty or fifty years ago, the question of church was something of an irrelevance. Many parachurch agencies specifically set out to avoid the question of church. Organizations such as Young Life, Youth for Christ, or IVF (UCCF in the UK) have tended to see the question of church as a distraction from their primary mission of evangelism. Historically their aim has been to present a relevant gospel instead of a relevant church.¹ Communication of truth has been the priority. Today's evangelists and youth ministers share this interest, but they are starting to realize that a relevant gospel also requires a relevant church.

A simple reason exists for this change in priorities: we face a situation that didn't affect our forebears. We have an incredible opportunity, because we see that many people are

searching for a spirituality; in the UK, young people may be more willing to become Christians than they have ever been. At the same time they appear to be increasingly reluctant to join our institutions.² They might have met Jesus, but they still don't want to meet the congregation! In parts of the US another phenomenon is at work. Young people are willing to attend youth fellowships, but when Sunday becomes Monday, they are all but indistinguishable in their behavior and in their beliefs, from their non-Christian peers at the high school. In these places youth ministry can look effective, but if we dig beneath the surface, problems emerge. In both of these cases a church that connects and makes a difference is needed. Yet to get the pattern of church life right, wherever we may be, we must understand why it does not work. It is hard to get the solution right if we have misunderstood the problem. To do this we need to examine development and changes in contemporary culture. This is where the term *liquid* becomes helpful.

LIQUID CULTURE

A number of thinkers have talked about contemporary culture in terms of a flexible or liquid modernity. David Lyon describes the impact of communication technologies and consumer culture as bringing about substantial changes in modernity. The new situation, he argues, is "mobile, mutable, fluid, flexible."³ Ulrich Beck identifies what he calls "reflexive modernity,"⁴ by which he means that modernity has turned its analytical skills in upon itself and has thereby created a less stable and more risk-filled environment. Discussing the change to an informational society, Manuel Castells focuses upon what he sees as a flexible and constantly changing environment. This flexibility shows itself in a variety of areas, including technological developments, organizational change, economics, and social structures.⁵

Constant technological change means that how we receive and process information is in a state of constant flux. The recent developments in how we can use mobile phones to do more than just talk to each other is good example. These technological changes produce an environment where we expect constantly to update or replace our communications equipment. The changes are so frequent that our relationship to technology has had to change to keep up. There's no point in

working our way through a manual that tells us how to operate a technology. Instead we dive in and learn as we go. Nowadays a computer program can do more than we need to do, so why bother learning all about it? The situation is always changing, and it isn't worth investing our time in comprehensive learning. A similar ambivalence operates in our relationship to where we work. The new economy means that most of us expect to change jobs on a regular basis. We will probably have to retrain at least twice in our working lives. This fluid employment situation has led to people investing less in their identity as employees of companies or even as a specific kind of skilled worker.

In his discussion of cultural change Leonard Sweet also uses the metaphor of liquid:

If the Modern Era was a rage for order, regulation, stability, singularity, and fixity, the Postmodern Era is a rage for chaos, uncertainty, otherness, openness, multiplicity, and change. Postmodern surfaces are not landscapes but wavescapes, with the waters always changing and the surfaces never the same. The sea knows no boundaries.⁶

Sweet believes that we need to develop a church that can negotiate what he describes as an "aquaculture" of postmodernity.⁷ The prevailing ecclesial image in Sweet's work is that of the boat. The Bible becomes a kind of maritime chart, and the minister is the ship's captain or pilot. Sweet's imagery is similar to mine, in that he uses a liquid metaphor to describe the contemporary cultural situation. He is right to pick up on sociological thinking that speaks of contemporary culture as fluid or flexible, but we part company in the metaphor of the boat. This image seems to imply that we can create a church that can float upon the waves and ultimately keep its passengers dry. Moreover, saying that we are in new and uncharted waters might lead the church to treat culture as an obstacle to be overcome or a problem to be solved.

Liquid church, in contrast, starts from the positive elements in the new, fluid environment and tries to work with these and make them part of the way forward for the church. We need to develop ways of being a church that doesn't float on water like a boat. To be a liquid church means that we are able to combine with water to become fluid, changeable, flexible, and so on. We need to embrace and internalize the

liquid nature of culture rather than to learn to sail through it. Only by locating church within culture can we find ways to develop a distinctive Christian expression within that culture.

SOLID AND LIQUID

In *Liquid Modernity*⁸ Zygmunt Bauman explores the changes in contemporary culture. He distinguishes between what he calls solid or “heavy” modernity and liquid modernity. He suggests that the modern world came out of the medieval feudal society through a process of questioning and replacing previous certainties. This process was originally seen as a kind of melting of the solids. So, he says, modernity emerges from the untying of the economy from traditional and religious linkages. Production is disconnected from a sense of obligation to the institutions of the family and the church. Thus ties of commitment to the home and to the sacred are replaced by a more rational system of organization and order.⁹ The factory, the office, modern government, and institutional bureaucracy all exhibit signs of this shift from traditional to a “modern” and a more rational order. In time, however, these systems are themselves regarded as restrictive. Modernity substitutes one solid for another, this being a solid built from the sum of individual choosing. Solid modernity is based on the victory of the settled over the nomad; it is a culture of production rather than consumption and above all is linked to ways of organizing production that were first developed by the car maker Henry Ford. Modernity was shaped by the Fordist principles of expansion, size, plant, boundaries, norms, rules, and class-orientated affinities and identities.¹⁰

Now, says Bauman, modernity is undergoing a liquifying process. Central to this change is the way that capital has been released from location. “In its heavy stage, capital was as much fixed to the ground as were the laborers it engaged. Nowadays capital travels light—with cabin baggage only, which includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular phone and a portable computer.”¹¹ Changes in productive processes mean that individuals can no longer expect to follow a safe career within one organization. Changes in technology and working arrangements have meant that an identity located in being a company employee or in a particular skill or trade becomes less feasible. At the same time large social collectives based on

class and identity have been eroded. A flexible workforce is made up of individual consumers who find their identity in how they live rather than social class. Who we are is something to be achieved rather than to be learned. The individual has to shape identity apart from community. In all of this, consumption is privileged over production: I am what I buy rather than what I do.¹² For individuals and for the wider processes of production the solidity of modernity has given way to a new arena that is characterized by increased flexibility and constant change. To describe this as a liquid modernity seems appropriate.

SOLID CHURCH

Solid modernity has spawned a solid form of church that has internalized some of the core values of modernity in its early phase. So, just as we can talk of solid modernity, it is equally possible to discuss solid church. Solid church does not refer to one distinct way of being a Christian community. It is not possible to point to one denomination or theology and say it originated solid church. Rather, across the denominations and in many nondenominational groups it is possible to identify a pattern of tendencies. These tendencies together illustrate aspects of what it is to be solid church.

Attendance at Church Services Equals Faithfulness

In the game show *The Weakest Link* contestants are asked questions in turn. A correct answer gives a certain amount of money to the individual, but this money must be banked if it is to form part of the eventual prize. Solid church has its eyes firmly on the bank. The local church may support many good and important activities, including mission trips, evangelism, youth ministry, social projects, and so on, but they are all assessed in terms of their effect or otherwise on regular Sunday attendance. People may have turned to Christ through the youth mission or Alpha course, and this is good, but they are not banked, they don't really count, until they start to attend Sunday services.

Congregation characterizes solid church. By congregation I mean the tendency to emphasize one central meeting. Usually this meeting is a worship service held weekly on a Sunday morning. Gathering in one place to do the same thing together

is one of the core values of solid church. Despite the evident interest in developing new ways of church, the basic assumption that we must form congregations has not been challenged. Even where we run separate youth churches or youth worship services,¹³ in effect we develop the same kind of congregational entity for one segment of the church. The congregation is king in solid church.

I have sometimes felt that the real purpose of church services is to enable clergy to count the congregation. This is probably a little cynical, but solid church finds its main sense of success in the number of people who attend on a Sunday. Regular church attendance is seen as being a significant test of spiritual health, and church growth is measured in terms of the size of congregations. The importance of Sunday attendance and congregational size can never be underestimated for solid church.

Bauman describes the factory system of solid modernity as being like a panopticon. The panopticon, invented by Jeremy Bentham, is a circular prison with layer upon layer of cells facing in toward the center of the circle. From one side of this prison the guards can observe the every movement of the prisoners and check to see if they follow the prescribed routine. Bauman observes that the panopticon does not just restrict the prisoner; it also imprisons the guards.¹⁴ The same is true for the relationship between managers and workers in the factory system. Both are locked into a relationship of checking and being checked.

Solid church represents similar restriction of those in the congregation and of those running the services. The emphasis upon attendance at one central service enables ministers to see easily if people are starting to flag in their spiritual lives. We might attend to hear the preacher, but clergy often attend because they want to see us there. The system of counting the sheep and making sure they attend can lead us into unhealthy relationships of surveillance and control. Ministers sometimes express frustration with the way that a central service restricts their ability to experiment and be creative, and the weight of being responsible for the regular attendance of members can be intolerable. As a youth minister in a church I felt something of this pressure. When the numbers of young people sitting in back pew increased I was doing well, but if they started to decrease, questions were asked. The implication was that

it was my job to look after their spiritual health, and this was assessed in terms of their regular attendance on Sunday mornings.

Size Counts

In solid modernity the size of the factory building was a major sign of success. Extending the production facility was the aim of business. Similarly solid church focuses on building bigger buildings to hold more people and process more activities. Megachurches are springing up around the fringes of American suburbs, each a witness to the success of that particular congregation and senior pastor. Churches such as Willow Creek have developed a line of activity based on people who want to learn the secret of growing one of these huge churches. In the UK, with its historic buildings, such megacongregations are almost nonexistent. Instead, the successful church extends its influence by developing a new outlet in a nearby location: a church plant.

Church planting has become a way of growing the influence and market share of the congregation. Church plants may be distinctive from the mother church, or they may be identical in many ways. Still the DNA will contain congregation as its basic ingredient. For church plant we could read congregation plant, because most have a central meeting for worship at the core.

One Size Fits All

The logic of mass production is standardization of product and services. It's Henry Ford's maxim, "You can have any color car as long as it's black." Solid church is based on the assumption that it is good for large numbers of very different people to meet in the same room and do the same sort of thing together. Worship therefore becomes a one-size-fits-all environment. The result is that we provide a rather bland and inoffensive diet of middle-of-the-road music and safe spirituality. Variety in what we have to offer is severely limited by the tastes and prejudices of those who attend. Extremes are tempered because one of the key values is that we do not offend anyone who comes to church regularly. One or two critical comments will prompt the leaders of the church to tell the youth group to turn the instruments down!

One size fits all is made into a virtue by those who run solid church. Everything about regular Sunday worship is designed to make us feel that even if we don't like it, we should still attend because it is good for us. As with cough medicine, we endure the bad taste because we are told that it is doing us good.

Join the Club

Like a local golf or tennis club, where active members keep the club going through a series of time-consuming committees, the church has become an exclusive club run for its members and organized by a team of voluntary helpers. Long-term service gives a degree of authority and deference on the part of others. For many key club members, organizing the club becomes an end in itself.

In our towns and cities, innumerable groups and associations function in similar ways. Such clubs offer individuals a place where they can find a sense of purpose and identity. They represent a social world that is like a small pond where one or two people can be big fish and a few others can find safety and security in the sunny waters.

Solid church, like these clubs, has become a place where some people find a sense of self and significance by giving themselves in voluntary activity. The congregation is also very like a pond, a self-contained world where people can feel secure and that they belong. It is worth thinking for a while of all the various roles and activities associated with the average church. Keeping the solid church running is a major activity demanding continual effort and activity not just from the paid staff but more importantly from the volunteers. This activity is made into a virtue, and it is part of what it means to be a faithful member. With people safely assigned to a particular role, leaders can feel that they are fulfilling themselves and that they have a sense of loyalty and commitment from the congregation. Clergy therefore make it their task to try to get people "more involved" in helping out in one way or another. Solid church makes voluntary activity in the organization part of the package of Christian discipleship. If you want spiritual experience or intimacy with fellow believers, then this comes only as part of a lifetime of service.

MODERNITY AND THE CHURCH

Our churches are not immune from the influence of contemporary culture. The importance of attendance at church services, the emphasis on planting more churches, the one-size-fits-all worship, and the development of church life as a kind of club all indicate the extent to which church has internalized solid modernity. These tendencies I have labeled solid church.

The ability to connect with modernity in the various ways has been a significant factor in the life and energy of today's church. The challenge for solid church is that culture has started to change toward a much more fluid form of modernity. When the waters are moving all around it, solid church finds itself in a very different place. We might think that we are doing the same kind of things that we have always done, but cultural change affects us whether we like it or not. Few if any of us are immune from cultural change. We share a common liquid culture. This means that we not only see the church differently; we also relate to it differently. So while solid church looks roughly the same as it always has, under the surface it too has started to change and mutate. In the next chapter we'll observe the mutations of solid church.