

## **INTRODUCTION**

The church of God must not stand still. In every age, inspired by the Holy Spirit, God's people have found new ways to express their fellowship and mission. As Philip Hefner puts it, "the church is never static and cannot make permanent the forms that prove effective in any particular time and place."<sup>1</sup> The challenges raised by evolving cultures and the events of history have always been met by innovation in church life. This fact was expressed by the Reformers' use of the phrase "*Ecclesia semper reformanda est*"—the church is continually in need of renewal.<sup>2</sup> Change is basic to the nature of the church, but not all change is good or right. Some changes leave the church marginalized in society and dislocated from its calling. *Liquid Church* argues that such changes in the wider culture have adversely affected the communal life and witness of the church, which means that church as we know it has a number of problems. Not least of these problems is the church's ability to be an effective agent for mission in the culture. We need a new reformation to renew and refresh our church if it is to be faithful to its purpose and its Lord.

### **HEALTH WARNING**

At the start I want to give a health warning: liquid church does not exist yet. Moreover, please do not think that I have set up and run a successful, thriving liquid church. This means that what I say here is an attempt to imagine rather than describe a different way of being church. So this book is not a prepackaged how-to manual for contemporary ministry. However, I feel that some people in the UK and the US are looking for a vision of a new way of being God's people in worship and mission. In response I have tried to develop such a vision, so at its heart this book is an act of theological imagination.

## WHAT IS LIQUID CHURCH?

To get the imaginative juices flowing I suggest that we need to shift from seeing church as a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time—that is, a congregation—to a notion of church as a series of relationships and communications. This image implies something like a network or a web rather than an assembly of people. An example of this was given to me by a research student who saw nothing strange in the idea of a liquid church made up of informal relationships instead of formal meetings. He explained that before we met for our academic seminar, he was in a coffee shop with one of his Christian friends. As they talked, he said, he felt that Christ was communicated between them. For him this was church. This is the familiar notion of fellowship, but when one adds the definite article to the word *fellowship*, it takes on a different character. “The fellowship” indicates a more structured, static, and formal notion of church. My phrase for describing this shift toward structures, institutions, and meetings is solid church.

So the first move in imagining a liquid church is to take the informal fellowship, in which we experience Christ as we share with other Christians, and say this is church. Maybe this idea is neither threatening nor revolutionary. However, the implications are profound. First, it implies that church might be something that we make with each other by communicating Christ, so it is not an institution as such. Second, it indicates that church happens when people are motivated to communicate with each other. In other words, its basis lies in people’s spiritual activity rather than in organizational patterns or buildings. Third and more controversially, I suggest that a liquid church does not need or require a weekly congregational meeting. In place of going to church, the emphasis could be on living as Christ’s body in the world. Worship and meeting with others will still have a place, but worship and meeting will be decentered and reworked in ways that are designed to connect to the growing spiritual hunger in society rather than being a place for the committed to belong (i.e., some kind of religious club).

This description raises the question of social organization. What will liquid church look like? My response is to point to the way in which contemporary media, business, and finance

are based on networks of communication. The argument is that communication of Christ through informal fellowship creates connections, groupings, and relationships. These can be seen as a kind of network where the Holy Spirit is at work creating church. Stuart Murray described this to me as the shift from church as a noun to church as a verb. So we can say, “I church, you church, we church.” For too long we have seen church as something that we attend. We might sing a few hymns or even play a more active role, but there is something passive and even a little alienating about the externalized and rather monolithic idea of church. If, however, church is something that comes about when we make it, then walls come tumbling down. Suddenly being church and doing church become an exciting adventure.

The next move in this imaginatory exercise is to ask what is the place of the various productive and creative processes that characterize contemporary Christian culture. By this I mean festivals, worship music, evangelism courses, and other processes. At present the institution of the church, local or national, seems to be largely irrelevant to these creative and productive activities. The whole web of entrepreneurial activity and dynamism that makes much of our evangelism and worship effective (and fun) is sort of, but not really, church. Liquid church would address this issue by saying that as these individuals, organizations, and groups carry out their activities, they are being or doing church. Moreover, as we participate in and use these groups’ events and products, we are also being or making church. It is provocative to use the language of consuming and commodities, but it is deliberate, because it points toward my main motivation for suggesting why we need a new pattern in church life: mission.

Liquid church is essential because existing patterns of church fail to connect with the evident spiritual interest and hunger that we see in the UK and the US. For some people, church as we know it is rewarding. Sunday worship is a meaningful activity, and the fellowship is a place where we can serve Christ and establish our identity with other Christians. For these people and for those who lead their congregations, liquid church is not a matter of urgency. I understand this, and I am sympathetic to the successful church. It lacks credibility to claim that these large churches will wither and die in the face of cultural change (whatever term we use for it—

post-Christian, post-Christendom, postmodern). The problem is not with those who come to church, since it seems for them church is generally a positive environment. The real issue must be those who no longer attend church or those who have never set foot inside one. How do we connect with these people? Linked to this is the growing feeling among some young adults and young people that church needs to be different to connect with their cultural sensibilities. Many of these people are starting to experiment with new patterns of church life. It is my conviction that the theological imagination used in this book to describe a church based on dynamic, informal relationships and the producing and consuming of events and products will help these emerging churches. At the same time it should help those interested in mission and evangelism to overcome some of the problems they experience in sharing the faith in contemporary culture. Both of these groups need a new kind of church.

Finally, as part of this health warning I should add that I use the language of Reformation (as opposed to revolution) deliberately. In the sixteenth century, church life changed in radical ways, but the Catholic Church did not melt away; rather, it also reformed itself. My dream for this vision of liquid church is that we will see similar things happening. Some people will set out on a new and radical course. Others will adjust what they are doing. Both reactions to this vision are fine. We need more variety in church life. There's little point in replacing one monochrome culture with another.

### **DESCRIBING CHURCH SOCIOLOGICALLY AND THEOLOGICALLY**

Descriptions of church are problematic. Paul Tillich makes a distinction between “sociological” and “theological” discussions of church, pointing out that the church is something of a paradox. On the one hand it exists in the “ambiguities of life in general,” while on the other hand it is connected to what he calls “the unambiguous life of the Spiritual Community.”<sup>3</sup> These two aspects, the theological and sociological, will be used together as I argue for a new, liquid approach to church. The sociological discussion within *Liquid Church* relates to changes in the economic and social experience of modernity. Chapter 1 describes modernity as dividing into two phases, solid and liquid modernity, both of which have affected the

church. I argue that patterns of church life have evolved so that church has developed to imitate some of the solid features of contemporary life. I call this solid church. In the liquid phase of modernity, this solid church has mutated into three forms: heritage, refuge, and nostalgic communities. These changes are described in chapter 2 in terms of personal identity and community in the new, fluid culture of modernity. The downside of changes in the solid church is that its various mutations render it limited in its ability to reach out to significant numbers of people in the fluidity of contemporary culture.

Chapter 3 starts the theological exploration of a liquid church by introducing Paul's theology of participation "in Christ." The apostle's corporate Christology becomes a starting point for a new ecclesiology. At the heart of this discussion is the possibility of a more fluid understanding of unity and diversity in the body of Christ. Chapter 4 introduces the idea of the network as the primary social structure in liquid church. Sociological descriptions of contemporary economic life as flows of communication through complex networks indicate a way forward for the church. Chapter 5 returns to the theological basis for liquid church by linking the idea of flows of relationship to recent discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. The intimate communication and *perichoresis*, or mutual indwelling, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is expressed as a flowing movement or dance. This dance opens up for our participation as we join in with the mission and worship of God who is three and one.

I argue that we can see aspects of a more liquid nature in the doctrine of Christ and in the doctrine of the Trinity. The basis for these lies in an increasing understanding of more fluid notions of communion and relationship. Liquid church finds its resonance in these aspects of the faith and expresses them through the social organization of a network. The notion of a Church as network cannot be imposed by church organizations or created by mission agencies, or at least it cannot come about through the action of these groups on their own. A network-based liquid church must emerge from a connection to the spiritual desires and preferences of those who are so far outside of church life. In this sense it is related to sociological theory of consumption. How this link is made is set out in chapters 6 and 8.

A consumer culture, like any other culture, is a mixture of good and bad. This means that some aspects of it connect with the gospel and some do not. A fluid church could easily be a misguided, runaway church. There is therefore a need to develop a theological framework within which a liquid church may have the freedom to flow. These limits are set out in chapter 7 and chapter 9. The first of these chapters deals with the doctrine of the Word of God and the second with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Finally, after this interconnected theological and sociological discussion, in chapter 10 I set out to describe what a liquid church might look like in practice.

### **WHAT IS CHURCH?**

If the church may be described in theological and in sociological terms, then it is a challenge to know where to start in this discussion. It is hard to wear the two kinds of analytical hats at the same time, for in practice they exist together in a creative mix. On the page one generally has to switch from one to the other. This means it is tricky to know where to start. Chapter 1 is sociological, and this is a fair representation of the order of my thinking about the question of new forms of church. Given that fact, I want to conclude this introduction by discussing the nature of the church in theological terms. I will do this by reviewing Paul's use of the term *church* and the relationship between Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and the historical church. I have chosen to work with Paul's writings because they are some of the earliest in the New Testament, and their context is firmly located in the Christian communities that were emerging out of mission. The theology of the church has developed since Paul's time, and these other theological and cultural considerations will need to be taken into account as I argue for liquid church. The question of the kingdom of God and the church is important because it is the classic starting point for a revisionist discussion of the institution of the church, and liquid church is revisionist.

In the New Testament the Greek word *ekklesia* has generally been translated in two ways. The first is by the term *assembly*, and the second is by the word *church*. According to Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, this latter definition has been variously interpreted, "depending upon denomination," as the whole church, the local congregation,

or the house church.<sup>4</sup> J. D. G. Dunn treats the word in a similar way in his discussion of Paul's theology. For Paul the term church also refers to the "assembly of Yahweh." Dunn points out that this a remarkable move for the Jewish Paul, who connects the various Christian churches, which were made up primarily of non-Jewish believers, with the notion of Israel as the people of God.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Paul identifies this wider assembly as characterizing the local community in a town or a city. "In short, there can be little doubt that Paul intended to depict the little assemblies of Christian believers as equally manifestations of and in direct continuity with 'the assembly of Yahweh,' 'the assembly of Israel.'"<sup>6</sup>

The notion of a universal church appears only in the later Pauline Epistles. In Col 1:18 Christ is the head of the wider body of the church. This does not necessarily mean that the local or the universal can be seen as opposing views within Pauline thought. Rather, the two exist together with a clear emphasis on the local community as the church of God.<sup>7</sup> At the same time the "church-ness" of the local community does not rely upon a link to a "universal church"; rather, this wider corporate reality—the people of God—depends upon a link to Christ and to the founding apostle.<sup>8</sup> The picture is complicated by Paul's evident willingness to regard the local community and much smaller house groups or house churches as also being the church of God. In 1 Cor 16:19 we see Paul sending greetings to "Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house." When 1 Cor 14:23 speaks of "the whole church" coming together, this indicates that regular gatherings may have consisted of a number of small groups meeting separately and that the wider congregational meeting would have been less frequent. He observes that these factors indicate the importance first of "assembly" as meeting together, but at the same time such meetings may have been quite small.

Historically, it is a reminder of how dependent on quite tiny groups was the development of Christianity in the northeastern Mediterranean area. Theologically, the point is that the dynamic of being "the church of God" did not require large groups in any one place.<sup>9</sup>

The way that small groups and larger groups represent church in Paul's thought should lead us to be cautious about claiming too much for any present-day assertions about what

church should or should not be. The use of the word *church* in Paul's writings does not indicate any one set pattern of community life that can guide us as we reimagine the church in our context. Instead, when we examine the use of the word *ekklesia* we are led to a web of interconnecting ideas related to the identity of the new, Gentile church. This identity is expressed at a universal, a local, and a small-group level simultaneously. If, however, we want the early church as our guide in developing a liquid church, then it should lead us in one important direction. We see in Paul's writing that what it means to be church cannot be contained in one clear social organization or institution. If we follow Paul, then we can regard a small group as being just as much church as a townwide meeting. Linked to this we can see that the church in a town like Corinth may have been made up of a network of interconnecting and related small groups. At the very least these insights should allow us to critique some of our current approaches to church.

#### **CHURCH AND KINGDOM**

How we organize and think of church today is the result of years of historical and social developments. The New Testament descriptions have been a theological starting point for the church, but at various times the sociological pattern of church life has had to be created and re-created. The historical expression of what it means to be the assembly of God has therefore gone through a series of changes and developments. What this means is that the way we organize church may be inherited, but it is not preordained.

To suggest that we need a liquid church is not as radical as it sounds; it is just another call for renewal and reformation. One of the classic ways that this tension has been discussed is to contrast the gospel of Jesus and the institution of the church. As Alfred Loisy puts it, "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, and what came was the Church."<sup>10</sup> This phrase has been quoted so many times that it has perhaps lost some of its power to shock. Yet it still contains a truth: the church, as we experience it, often does not live up to the message of its Lord. As individuals we fall short of the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God. This is also the case with the church. Loisy's observation implies that the kingdom offers an ideal of the reign of God in the world, and we have put in its place an

institution. This basic insight causes us to take stock of what we are doing as God's people. It is an energy for reformation and renewal. At the same time the vision of the kingdom helps us to understand the church as part of God's ultimate plan for the world. The kingdom locates the church as part of what New Testament scholars call eschatology, or the study of the last things.

There has been considerable discussion among New Testament scholars concerning meaning of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> A central question in this debate has been how much the kingdom of God is an event expected in the future and related to the end of the world (the *eschaton*) and how much it was instituted by the coming of Christ. Mark's Gospel opens with Jesus preaching that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). At the same time believers are encouraged to look forward and above all be prepared for the kingdom that will come in the future (Matt 8:11; 25:31–34). This means that the reign of God has commenced in Christ, but it is to be fulfilled at the end of time. Jesus leads us to the ultimate or last things, but now eschatology has to be stretched to a point where it has a beginning in Christ and an end in Christ.

The kingdom is the dynamic, kingly rule of God. It is also the arena within which this reign is experienced.<sup>12</sup> The kingdom is not identical with the church; rather, the kingdom creates the church. G. E. Ladd likens this to the parable in which the kingdom is described as being like a net that is dragged through the sea catching in its spread good and bad fish. The kingdom creates first the fellowship of Jesus' disciples and then the church, but neither is pure or perfect community.<sup>13</sup>

Individual Christians and the church exist in a tension between this "it is here now" and "it will soon be here" reality of life in the reign of God. The church is conditioned by the eschatological pattern of God's revealing of himself. Thus Hans Küng can say that: "Christian existence is lived between an indicative and an imperative, between present and future; the Christian community also lives in this tension, as the body of Christ and the people of God, as consecrated and yet sinful."<sup>14</sup> Küng points to how the sacraments of baptism and communion express this "inbetween-ness" of the church. They are simultaneously a remembrance of things that are past and an

anticipation of what may come in the future. The church in the present expresses the life of God in the present, but this life is focused in Christ, who was and is and is to come. This eschatological, kingdom perspective serves to relativize our current expressions of church. The reign of God, says Küng, expresses the life-giving, healing, joyful glory of God. The problem is that because it is “in between” the church is also sinful and subject to mistakes and failures. The result is that most churches will fall short of the kingdom ideal.<sup>15</sup>

### **A LIQUID REFORMATION**

The church must not stand still, because in every age it must seek to be a true expression of the kingdom. From time to time old patterns must be reviewed and renewed. I believe that we are in such a time.

Changes in contemporary culture have led many people to feel that church must again go through a period of innovation and change. In my view this is another kind of reformation. Far from resisting such change this brief excursion into the theology of the church appears to encourage a more open approach to the development of Christian communities. Paul's use of the word *ekklesia*, rather than exclusively supporting a solid congregational pattern of church life, might be seen as suggesting a more fluid or networked kind of community based on small groups. Alongside this the theology of the kingdom indicates that the organizational structures of the church should not be regarded as finalized or perfect. These insights allow us to approach the social structures of the church with a radical criticism, and that is just what we will do in the next two chapters.