



Breaking the Mould of Christendom: Kingdom Community, Diaconal Church and the Liberation of the Laity

by David Clark

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■ reviewed by Malcolm Brown

As the dustier shelves of the second-hand bookshops attest, every generation produces a fair crop of literature critiquing the church of the age and offering a remedy for its ills. The contents are fairly predictable: a “crisis” in the church is identified, usually by emphasising shortfalls and talking down signs of hope. An analysis of “the age we live in”, composed of persuasive but sweeping generalisations, follows, and the future is presented as a stark choice between polarised alternatives. Then comes a series of remedies, behind which one might detect the anguish of a frustrated cleric passed over for preferment. The overall message is that if the church at large had listened to the author it wouldn’t be in the mess it’s now in. But

the decades pass, the world moves on and the church still endures, wracked, no doubt, by new crises.

This has been a predominantly Anglican literary genre; especially prolific in the last fifty years. And now David Clark has shown that Methodism can produce the same phenomenon in its own style. The title is a very good description of the book’s aims and contents.

Clark makes some very worthwhile points. The notion of Christendom certainly doesn’t work adequately in any social or political context today. Behind theological movements like Radical Orthodoxy is often a more or less explicit hope that Christendom can be restored, whilst others recognise its lingering echoes with greater or lesser degrees of tolerance. There is clearly a serious theological debate to be had about the

influence of Christendom thinking on the present and its place in any future ecclesiology. Unfortunately, Clark makes Christendom theology his whipping boy for the church’s current ills in a way which is neither historically nuanced nor open to alternative theological approaches. Milbank’s argument for a reconstructed idea of Christendom in *Christianity and Social Theory* is not mentioned. Instead, it is simply asserted that the “model of the Christendom church dominates the scene” (p.58). You could have fooled me.

Clark is certainly onto something when he seeks to emphasise the diaconal calling as central to the kind of ministry which might serve the world well. But again he seems compelled to attack straw men. His history of holy orders is superficial and when he talks of the function of deacons being eclipsed by that of priests he

shows no sense of how the two orders might be authentically different. Indeed, his desire to make diaconal ministry the pivot of his argument gets in the way of an otherwise insightful analysis of the Industrial Mission movement, sector ministers and lay people's vocation to the world of work. Because the solution must be diaconal, Clark attributes to such ministers a presbyteral dimension which, to most, has been largely irrelevant. (There is, of course, a fascinating question about what is really happening when presbyters downplay their priestliness, whether to align themselves with the laity or with deacons). But the acute tensions which arise when believers, ordained or not, try to translate faith into the context of workplaces and the economy is only peripherally addressed by Clark's essentially historical and structural account of the travails of Industrial Mission and sector ministries.

Many readers will cheer Clark's celebration of lay ministries and his yearning for a church committed to adult learning and shared leadership. This has been a recurrent plea, across many denominations, for decades. Another book of exhortation therefore falls a little flat. Why have these eminently desirable characteristics not taken root in any sustainable way? Why does the church persist in being hierarchical and often know-nothing? If it is because we are all wrong we are doubtless doomed. But if it is because there is

something, as yet not fully understood, about churches which makes them behave like this, a more careful sifting of the evidence would be helpful.

Almost half the book is devoted to extended case studies of churches and church projects where Clark has attempted to put some of these ideas into practice – indeed, this section is a kind of ministerial review of the greater part of his career. It is good to know so comprehensively where an author is coming from. But there are very great hazards in participatory action research which can only be overcome through acute self-awareness and some form of external moderation. Sadly these are lacking here. Although stories of church life can be enlightening and encouraging, stories from an author's own ministry need to be read with the same ideological suspicion that one normally reserves for political autobiography.

So whilst Clark has some very interesting ideas and tells a good story, the overall value of this book is compromised by his style and approach to argumentation. He lapses constantly into a rather confusing first person plural – sometimes a Royal "We", at others enlisting the reader and his sources in a common project to which they have not signed up. The occasional reduction of ideas to a kind of flip-chart diagram (which needs a great deal more explication than is offered here)

and a depressing preference for reducing complex ideas to bullet points or slogans, do not aid the reader's engagement and there is much too much assertion without evidence.

The polarity with which Clark confronts the reader is that between "community and chaos". Whilst the whole of the Liberal Enlightenment Project suggests that there are some conceivable options in between, it is a polarity with which many would agree. But one of the shadow sides of community is authoritarianism – a shadow which the church has often chosen to make its own. The overall tenor of this book is that, if only the church would share Clark's analysis and learn from his ministerial example, things could be transformed. Whether a church which still punches above its weight (thanks to the legacy of Christendom) in Western societies, which maintains within itself a lively dialogue about what it means to be faithful, and which has a long history of walking the tightrope between counter-culturalism and cultural collusion, would gain from this, is debateable. A degree of chaos may, in fact, reflect the nature of a church exercising discipleship in the era between Pentecost and the Parousia. This is uncomfortable for those who prefer the authoritarianism of managed communities – especially if they are in charge – but might represent something very important to the life of faith. ■

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