

CHURCH AND MISSION IN REDEMPTION: EXPLORING CHURCH AND
MISSION THROUGH THE COMMUNAL AND MISSIONAL PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS -

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Abstract

This article proposes that any perceived contest for priority between church and mission is based on a failure to understand both as penultimate phenomena which are only comprehensible in light of God's redemptive plan. Such redemption as it is revealed across the narrative scope of Scripture is trinitarian and, therefore, communal in nature, and in consonance with this, both church and mission must be viewed in such terms. Whilst this may already be the case within academic circles, a broader more thorough-going shift in paradigm will require richly drawn canonical narratives with the power to strengthen the imaginative and practical grasp of church communities on their being and function. One such narrative is that of communal and missional priesthood expressed through representation of both God to his world and the world to God.

In the not very distant past, questions about what the Christian life should look like in evangelical terms were regularly answered from the pulpit with reference, back in time, to God's creative work and the pattern which this supposedly revealed. According to this view, Adam, in his splendid isolation, was created for his own personal relationship with God. Being frail and human, even in his ideal state, he needed human companionship – and, well, it was all downhill from there! The central goal of the Christian life was to again walk alone with God, without sin or distraction; a return to an unpopulated Eden where God/Jesus and “I”, could leave the inconvenient world behind. There were, unfortunately, and perhaps because of the fall, a lot of other people on the same quest, but “my” job was largely to avoid having my relationships with them cause me to sin, and thereby hinder my relationship with Jesus, and God's salvific plan for me. Such evasive action was termed Love. The best and

most loving thing I could do for anyone else was help them get with this same plan so that, like me, they could each spend a spiritual, and therefore probably disembodied, eternity with God in heaven.

Of course, I exaggerate, and I hope you are duly outraged, but my purpose is the disclosure of some of the deeply ingrained narratives which have *and continue* for many evangelicals to shape our (mis-) understanding of what it means to be church, to participate in God's mission, and to live in and towards God's great redemptive plan.¹ In complete contrast to my outline above, the sweeping scriptural narrative of this redemption, from creation, through Christ and to final eschatological fulfilment, is fundamentally relational and expressed in ongoing covenantal movements which always and integrally entail a covenant community. These movements culminate in Jesus Christ, in whom God unites covenanted Israel with those of all nations who, in Christ, comprise the community of the new covenant which is his body, the church.² In this age the church is an anticipation of its own fulfilment in the "new humanity" (Eph 2:15) which, in its relationality *with and before* God, reflects God's very being: an eschatological community who (*sic*) together, and after Christ, bear the *imago Dei* in the midst of God's new creation. The argument for such a paradigm has been fully made out on scriptural, theological and sociological grounds elsewhere,³ and the main focus of this paper is to take up its implications in terms of the relationship between church and mission in the dynamic of this trinitarian/communal redemption.

I take as my entry point Stephen Bevan's much quoted adage that "The church does not have a mission, but the mission has a church."⁴ This proposal highlights tensions between these two theological concepts: mission and church are represented as at least dichotomous, and their reordering in terms of possession indicates that, whilst in the past, we may have considered church as the overarching reality with mission as its subset, we are now to

¹ Whilst there has perhaps been a growing recognition in wider evangelical circles of the need for what Kevin Vanhoozer terms "the eschatological imagination," individualism appears to remain deeply embedded in evangelical understandings of both faith and church. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Putting on Christ: Spiritual Formation and the Drama of Discipleship," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 8, no. 2, 162. Regarding individualism and its impact on religion see, for example, Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 232-235. Though less vehemently expressed in Australian society, individualism is nevertheless pervasive both generally and in the religious sphere. See Gary D. Bouma, *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17, 168-169.

² I use "church" throughout this paper in a fairly fluid way, moving between the universal and local senses, and relying on context to suggest which meaning might be more appropriate.

³ For example, Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981); Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2001); and Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁴ Stephen Bevan, "The Mission Has a Church: An Invitation to the Dance," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 15, no. 1 (2009): 11, accessed May 21, 2015, http://aejt.com.au/2009/issue_14/?article=197644.

consider that mission is the overarching reality with church as its subset. In either case, a sense of competition is clearly at work.

In one sense, I have no argument with the impulse behind Bevan's transvaluation which reprioritises mission; the fact that mission has long languished as an awkward and often ignored "obligation" is a damning indictment of our theology and practice of both church and mission. The problem I believe, however, is not addressed by inverting, and thereby continuing, the tendentious relationship between these two realities, but rather by bringing them both into focus in light of a third and ultimate category, that is, redemption, understood in the trinitarian/communitarian terms I have outlined above. Such a revisioning of church and mission may, I will then propose, be encompassed through the canonical narrative of priesthood which highlights practices which integrate rather than divide church and mission, as both serve their role in redemption. Neither church nor mission possesses the other, but rather redemption claims and shapes them both.

Addressing Problematic Concepts of Church and Mission

The Problem with Church

Bevan does, I believe, place his finger on the nub of the ecclesial issue, when he suggests that "What is real is not what is concerned with itself or turned in on itself (this latter is Luther's definition of sin!). What is real is going beyond oneself, being in relation, calling others to relation."⁵ Such a statement should provoke important questions concerning, first, the nature of the community of Christ's new covenant, the church, as it exists within itself, and, second, the nature of church in its standing in relation to the world.

These two forms of relationality, I would suggest, are woven of the same fabric: the covenant community cannot function in relation to the world in terms which do not hold within the church itself. The capacity of the covenant community to turn outward, which as I will establish below *is* a covenantal imperative, can only be built upon the capacity of its individual members to also turn to one another, recognising their ecclesial relatedness so that the community is able to bear and represent the image of God. "Going beyond oneself" must be practised at both the individual and communal level, and either without the other is both theologically and practically unsustainable.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

First, regarding relationships within churches, many practising Christians, particularly of the Free Church variety but increasingly across other ecclesial types, have found themselves struggling to maintain a sense that Christianity is about anything more than “me and Jesus,” or that the church is anything more than a voluntary association in the Lockean sense.⁶ This individualistic and consumerist understanding of church is a caricature of a Free Church ecclesiology which, for English Separatists and their Baptist offspring, indicated rather that, whilst believers were to follow their consciences free of any state control, they were deeply bound by the covenantal call of God on their lives into relationship with God and with one another in the context of the covenanted church community; a belief founded on the multi-dimensional nature of covenant which they found in Scripture.⁷

Covenant relationship with God, they understood, has from its outset been inseparable from the forms of relationality which pertain within the covenant community. Leviticus 19 is, for example, rife with covenantal declarations in the form of “I am the LORD your God” as the grounds for the forms of relationality which community members are to practice towards one another: Israel is to be holy, “for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). God’s holiness must come to expression within the covenant community in relational form: the two concepts cannot be separated if Israel is to bear God’s image. The holiness of God will be exhibited by the internal relationships within the covenant community. Likewise, for the communities of the new covenant, Jesus’ own teachings and those perpetuated by the NT authors, pursue the same inescapable theological logic: to know God’s love in Christ is inevitably to “love one another” (John 13:34). A Spirit-enlivened capacity for “love” will now outreach the OT law at every point (Matt 5:17-7:12), and in doing so, the new covenant communities will begin to bear, as Christ has fully done, the image of God. Love for other members of the covenanted community then, far from being an evasive strategy by which one avoids marring one’s relationship with God, becomes integral to the very nature of that relationship with God.

Yet, in covenantal terms, the relational thrust cannot end here. Israel’s holiness, her separateness, was not just *from* the nations but *for* the nations. If the covenant community was to function in God’s likeness before the nations, it was impossible that it would “be inwardly-focussed and self-absorbed with its righteousness and compassion limited within the community.”⁸ Rather it must “remain conscious that covenant with YHWH entailed a

⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–42.

⁸ Anne Klose, “Covenantal Priesthood as a Narrative of Community for Australian Baptist Churches,” *Colloquium* 45, no. 1 (2013), 69.

more generous form of community with an ethical responsibility and imaginative reach beyond its own boundaries.”⁹ Whilst it may be argued that for Israel this was to occur in a mostly passive and ontological sense, with the breaking out of blessing from within the ethnic limits of Israel through Christ, the communities of the new covenant were called to a fully active participation in God’s mission of bringing the world to blessing in Christ by the Spirit by every available means. This movement will be given particular shape in the following discussion of the canonical narrative of priesthood, but the point stands: to be in covenant with God as God’s people is inextricably linked with the call to God’s mission, representing him by living together in his likeness. The covenantal relationships between God and his people, and amongst those people as they worship God, will result in passing on God’s blessing, the trajectory of which is always through and beyond the covenant community. The problem with “church” is then not with church per se, but with a failure to practice relationality both within and beyond the covenant community as God’s intentions for it are comprehensively represented in Scripture.

The Problem with Mission

Again with the concept of mission, my issues relate, not to what occurs with a missional focus at its best,¹⁰ but with the persistent populist evangelical view of mission as a narrow and individualistic form of salvation. Salvation undoubtedly culminates, in one sense, in the forgiveness of sin by grace through faith (Eph 2:1-8). Yet, on the other hand, Scripture is replete with salvation in many forms. For Israel, YHWH’s salvation was entirely comprehensive, entailing liberation from political, economic, social and spiritual oppression. More profoundly, in the midst of the crisis of humanity’s rejection of YHWH’s sovereignty, the very reason for Israel’s existence was that “YHWH insistently wills that the world should be brought to blessing.”¹¹

According to Richard Bauckham, such blessing

refers to God’s characteristically generous and abundant giving of all good to his creatures and his continual renewal of the abundance of created life. Blessing is God’s provision for human flourishing. But it is also relational: to be blessed by God is not only to know God’s good gifts but to know God himself in his generous giving. Because it is relational the movement of blessing is a movement that goes out from God and returns to him. God’s blessing of people overflows in their blessing of others

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See, for example, Graham Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2012).

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 431.

and those who experience blessing from God in turn bless God, which means that they give all that creatures really can give to God: thanksgiving and praise.¹²

This is epitomised in Christ, for whom the Good News entailed, as it had from the time of Isaiah, such blessing in the form of good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, the liberation of the oppressed, and the proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19). This broadening of the sense of God’s, and therefore the church’s, mission will again be more fully explored shortly in relation to priesthood, but the point here is that this understanding of mission as the sharing of covenant blessing more fully reflects the scriptural narrative of redemption than that which speaks only in terms of the forgiveness of the individual’s sin.

And, secondly, as Bauckham’s summary of blessing suggests, the meaning of mission is necessarily transformed when we recognise that in both the Old and New Testaments, God’s final redemptive eschatological reality will be profoundly relational: “He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them” (Rev 21:3). In this redeemed kingdom, God will be in perfect relationship with humanity, and therefore, inevitably, humanity itself will be healed, not of its diversity, but of its sinful strife and division. This new humanity, overcoming the fundamental divide between Jews and Gentiles which epitomises all broken relationality (Eph 2:15), will, in Christ, finally bear the *imago Dei*, living together in God’s covenant blessings (Rev 21:1-7).

If this is the end goal of God’s mission, then the means by which it will be brought about will be consonant with it. Whilst, explains Lesslie Newbigin, individualism demands that, “my own identity and my own destiny are, in the last analysis, mine alone,” and that, as a “spiritual monad,” other people, and even the context of the created world, are superfluous to “my” salvation, Scripture presents a very different narrative.¹³ According to Newbigin,

The reality is not so: God, as he is revealed to us in the gospel, is not a monad. Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore, there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness. No one can be made whole except by being restored to the wholeness of that being-in-relatedness for which God made us and the world and which is the image of that being-in-relatedness which is the being of God himself.¹⁴

¹² Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), 34.

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Revised, Kindle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 68, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

Mission, at every level, is thus also a relational enterprise and there is an essential sociality to salvation, so that as Volf proposes, “Salvation *is* communion with God and human beings. The self-enclosed individual is caught in the opposite of salvation.”¹⁵

A Reintegration of Church and Mission in Redemption

And so we return to church as the expression of covenant community in our current age and, therefore, its relationship to the world in mission. Is the church a primary means by which God is exercising his mission in order to bring the eschatological vision of covenant community into reality? I have already established that it is unthinkable to imagine that such a task is not integral to the very being of the covenant community: to be God’s people is to reflect God’s nature and way of being with and for the world. Yet church is not only a means to an eschatological end, but as Newbigin and others would have us understand, a foretaste and a sign of that end.¹⁶ According to Rooy, the early Puritans, had a two-fold understanding of the relationship between church and mission: “in the first place, [the church] has been appointed to channel the truth, to preach the gospel. And, secondly, [the church] must grow by self-establishment.”¹⁷ The church has a “double mission character, as bearer of the message and as goal of the mission.”¹⁸ This mission, as was hinted at above, is not confined to the church, but the church does exist, according to Nigel Wright, “as its sacrament, sign and instrument.”¹⁹ The church is neither fully nor yet the kingdom, and yet, for Ross Langmead,

The vibrant life of a Christian community which is open at the edges has an evangelistic dimension whether or not its gatherings have an avowedly evangelistic intention. The extent to which the church lives as a sign of the kingly reign of God is the extent to which it points to God’s Good News. The church which is a foretaste of the new community *is* good news and therefore *speaks* good news... By following Jesus together in community we are engaging naturally in mission. By living out a new set of relationships counter-culturally, roughly in the shape of God’s Commonwealth, we proclaim the possibility of a new creation where love and justice rule and those on the edge are welcomed into the centre.²⁰

Mission, then, does indeed occur for the sake of the church as it currently stands as the prolepsis of the eschatological community to come, and the church is not comprehensible as

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 172.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1953), 147.

¹⁷ Sidney H. Rooy, *The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition: A Study of Representative Puritans* (Laurel, MS: Audubon Press, 2006), 319.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jurgen Moltmann*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 10.

²⁰ Ross Langmead, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission,” *Mission Studies* 25 (2008), 15.

the current covenant community unless she is turned outward to the world in mission. Both things are equally and essentially true. The question then arises as to which canonical narratives we might turn in order to strengthen our imaginative and practical grasp on this trinitarian/communitarian redemptive paradigm.

Church and Mission as Communal Priesthood

There are possibly several canonical narratives which might play such a role, but my proposal here is that, perhaps unexpectedly, it is the narrative of priesthood which holds promise to fulfil this need. The choice is possibly surprising since this canonical narrative has, I would suggest, been largely obscured by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as it is commonly understood in Protestant terms. This doctrine, according to Walter B. Shurden's small but influential book, declares

I am believers' rights. I am your right of direct and immediate access to God through Jesus Christ... I am your right to choose Christ for yourself. Nobody else can choose Him for you. Nobody else can stop you from choosing. You must choose Him all by yourself... I am the very opposite of proxy religion. Stand-ins won't work. Spectator religion is out. Personal participation is all that counts.²¹

Taken in context, he makes certain significant points about the mediation of a priestly class and proxy declarations of faith within some forms of church, and yet the concept of priesthood is also largely stripped of two of its central scriptural features. Scripture records that God's covenant people, both Israel and church, are called to a priesthood which is *communal* and *missional* before God and the world. In the context that "the whole earth is mine," YHWH calls Israel to be "a priestly nation" (Exod 19:5-6). In the NT, after the pattern of Christ who is the "great high priest" (Heb 4:14), the community of the new covenant is

...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people;

once you had not received mercy,

but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9-10)

Such communal and missional priesthood only becomes comprehensible in terms of its broader canonical context. In its most explicit manifestation, its form and function become

²¹ Walter B. Shurden, *The Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1987), 10–11.

apparent in the Aaronic and Levitical priesthood which “represents the macro priesthood of the whole nation.”²² Shurden’s theme of access is certainly present as such priests carry out the dangerous task of passing between the sacred and profane,²³ but the purpose of this access, far from being for the sake of the priest himself, was entirely focused on service of God and God’s people in the form of dynamic representation. We might enter our exploration of this process at any point in its cycle, but I begin here with the priest’s representation of YHWY’s people before YHWY, facing YHWY in grateful worship as he presided over Israel’s worship in its feasts and festivals (summarised in Leviticus 23), and offered sacrifices on their behalf.²⁴ Then, as a result of these actions, steeped in awareness of YHWY’s covenant love for and forgiveness of Israel, the priest turned to the people, now representing YHWH to them, in revelation, instruction, and declaration of blessing.²⁵ Then, having been face to face with YHWH’s people in their great need and dependency, the priest turned once more to YHWY, bringing them to YHWH’s remembrance (Exod 28: 29-30),²⁶ confessing their sins and interceding on their behalf (Lev 16:21; Ezra 6:10; Joel 1:13).²⁷ At every turn, Nicolas Haydock suggests, mission is “central to the function and theology of the priesthood.”²⁸

This was also the pattern of the priestly representative role which Israel as a nation was called to play between YHWY and the nations and which was fulfilled by Christ. Then, only and entirely under Christ’s aegis, the church in its turn is called to take on such a communal and missional role between God and his world, again in representative terms.

Priestly Representation of *God to the World*

The familiar phenomenon of the church’s priestly representation of God to the world is framed here as occurring in three modes; pre-eminently in the proclamation or articulation of God’s blessing as revealed in Scripture;²⁹ but also through the sharing of God’s blessing through direct action in society, and the demonstration of God’s blessing through the witness

²² Frank Rees, “The Worship of All Believers,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 41, July (2005), 178. Christopher Wright paraphrases this connection as God saying to Israel, “You will be for me to all the rest of the nations what your priests are for you. Through you I will become known to the world, and through you ultimately I will draw the world to myself.” Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 330.

²³ Richard D. Nelson, *Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 59, 61.

²⁴ See, for example, the sacrificial duties of the priests set out in Leviticus 1-7.

²⁵ Nelson, *Raising up a Faithful Priest*, 40-46, 86, 87.

²⁶ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 137.

²⁷ Nelson, *Raising up a Faithful Priest*, 86.

²⁸ Nicolas Haydock, *The Theology of the Levitical Priesthood* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2015), 18.

²⁹ See, for example, Graham Hill’s reflections on the primacy of Scripture for the church and its ensuing centrality as the basis for a “missional ecclesiology... grounded on solid biblical foundations.” Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City*), 108.

of the life of the church community. Such proclamation in word, sharing in action, and demonstration in life together, come together to convey God's blessing by representing God to his world, and provide a foretaste of that blessing which will be fulfilled at the eschaton.

The communal concept of priesthood assists us, firstly, in understanding that this proclamation of the blessing of salvation, rather than being made by an isolated individual, "always takes place through the multidimensional confession of faith of the *communio fidelium*."³⁰ Such proclamation occurs as the church community reads and teaches Scripture, and as it worships in song, prayer and sacraments, proclaiming God's blessing not only as its own source of life, but as that which will bring life to the world.³¹ In continuation with *this* proclamation within the community, the gospel is proclaimed by community members who go out from, yet remain fundamentally part of, this community: they carry the church community, and the good news it proclaims, as they go.³² Their primary identity is that of church community members, and it is as such that they function in the midst of their other non-church communities.³³ In this, they are supported by the "remaining others," who "create the plausibility structures for the mediation of faith":³⁴ together, the lives of members of the community build a complete and coherent representation of what it is that God is doing in blessing and saving.

Salvation, as was discussed above, in its fullest sense encompasses the *whole range* of God's blessing which is "God's provision for human flourishing," and which it takes a whole community to embody. It is the role of the church to participate with God as this blessing is shared with God's world through action through and for that world.³⁵ Church communities exist, not only for the sake of those who will come to salvation, but for those who as yet have no knowledge that such a thing is possible, and even for those who knowing it will nevertheless reject it.³⁶ Church communities which are formed by the narrative of Scripture will understand that such blessing, "has a vital contribution to make in refounding the future

³⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 163.

³¹ Grenz includes the witness of the church by its life together and works of service to the gospel as proclamation, but I will deal with these separately below. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 423.

³² Rees draws attention to life of the church community in both its gathered and dispersed forms. When dispersed to their many and varied other activities "we act as individuals and we participate in many other communities and sub-cultures," but "here too we are 'the church.'" Frank Rees, "Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2006), 8.

³³ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 427.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 34.

³⁶ Colin Greene and Martin Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2008), 220.

of human society,³⁷ and will seek to be “socially aware and responsive.”³⁸ Members of such communities,

envision a church that not only counters alternative cultures but also seeks sacrificially to serve the good of others – the city, the nation, common humanity, not least the poor. Salt does not confront; it enhances. Believers must be the best possible citizens (cf. Jer 29:7 cf. Also 1 Pet 1:1; Jas 1:1), and that means that Christians, who are taking their cue (and thus their worldview) from outside the dominant culture, not only shape and form a Christian culture recognizably different from that in which it is embedded but also become deeply committed to enhancing the whole.³⁹

Such proclamation and the sharing of that blessing in action cannot be separated: both are necessary forms of representing God by conveying the fullness of God’s blessing to God’s world. Yet, proclamation as “the articulated declaration of the lordship of Jesus” without action fails to grasp that God’s blessing entails anything more than an individualistic and spiritualised salvation.⁴⁰ On the other hand, actions which share God’s blessing do not stand alone either: blessing in action may well require some explanation, and church communities “need to be careful not to assume that unexplained action is evangelistic.”⁴¹ This connection too, however, can be all too easily over-stressed when actions which seek to share God’s blessings are used simply as stepping stones towards opportunities to “share the gospel.” As Frost points out, “non-Christians see this ploy a mile off,” and it projects the sense that church communities are just more cynical and self-interested providers of goods for individuals to consume.⁴² The essential binding ingredient as church communities convey God’s blessing to God’s world through proclamation and action is then, thirdly, the witness of such communities as they live their lives together in solidarity with Christ, offering “a ‘transformative example.’”⁴³ Blessing must be announced in word and shared in action, but if that blessing is to be coherent and engaging, then it must also be demonstrated by the community as their witness to its reality: it is this witness, this demonstration, which in its integrity knits word and action together. The failure of this witness, and therefore of integrity, undermines the whole work of conveying God’s blessing to God’s world. In these terms, the covenant-keeping conduct of members of the covenant community towards one another is absolutely vital to mission.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rees, “Enabling Congregations to Become Theological Communities,” 6.

³⁹ D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 143.

⁴⁰ Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Centre of the Church*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), location 603, 619.

⁴¹ Ibid., location 625.

⁴² Ibid., locations 278, 1115ff.

⁴³ Wright, *Disavowing Constantine*, 74.

Priestly Representation of the World to God

Much less familiarly, the canonical narrative of priestly representation also suggests that God's communal and missional priesthood will represent the world before him.

Firstly, as was the case with Israel and Christ, the church community's priestly representation of the whole of humanity may be viewed as ontological.⁴⁴ In its very being, the meaning and purpose of God's covenant people "is to bear the rejection of the alienated other in the self before God."⁴⁵ This "bearing" does "not add anything to what is accomplished in Christ any more than Israel's election 'preempts' it,"⁴⁶ and yet, just as Israel's high priest came before God, bearing in his breastplate a reminder of the tribes of Israel, and bringing Israel to "continual remembrance before the Lord", the church community bears the world before God.⁴⁷ In doing so, it does not compromise either the integrity of the church community as consisting only of those who have been saved by grace through faith, and who are thereby distinctively joined with Christ by his Spirit, nor those beyond the church by the oppressiveness of turning them into "anonymous Christians."⁴⁸ Rather, such representation is best characterised as "provisional":

As through Israel the promises of God were to reach beyond the covenant people to the nations, so it is because there is a community of the new covenant - a people united to Christ by the Spirit, and so participating already in the salvation which has been wrought by God in him - that those who are as yet outside that community are also held provisionally within the sphere of God's promised blessings.⁴⁹

In this way, the church community continues to represent the world to God much as Christian parents do their children, bearing them in their being until they accept salvation for themselves. And yet, also like such parents, they move beyond such ontological bearing, in persistently, prayerfully and hopefully representing the world before God.

Secondly, then, although representation in its ontological form may not require the conscious involvement of the church community, becoming aware of this dynamic and imaginatively engaging with it will further shape and enable the community in its representation of the world to God in forms such as confession and intercession. Grounded in this high priestly work of Christ, such confession in the Christian community begins in the communal confession of sin by the community in its worship. Here, firstly, the community deals with

⁴⁴ McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election*, 163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁷ Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 137.

⁴⁸ McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election*, 156,157. See also Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 151.

⁴⁹ McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election*, 152.

the fact that sin continues to impact its own life. Despite all that God has done in Christ and by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the community remains, in this age, *simil justus et peccator*. Both individually and as a community, sin, in the full scope of its manifestations, continues to be at work. In making confession of such sin *within* the community the first lesson of solidarity is learnt in that members recognise that they stand together and make confession of such sin as a shared burden (Gal 6:2). This concept is now extended to the world beyond the community, in recognition that the solidarity of sin bridges any division between the church community and the world. In fact, sin is more comprehensible in the world than it is in the church community with all of God's resources (grace, forgiveness, the transforming work of the Holy Spirit) at its disposal. The gap between the church community and the world is no longer one of judgement by the church community of the world, but rather one which provides opportunity for the priestly service of confession by the church community as the world's priestly representative on the basis of shared sinfulness. This does not mean that the church has nothing to say to the world concerning what it understands will result in human flourishing, but rather that such prophetic critique will come from a place of hopeful solidarity rather than isolationism and triumphalism. Humility, or "a relational positioning in order to serve", as Haydock, repeatedly points out, is vital to maintain the capacity for priestly mission.⁵⁰ So, although seeking at every point to counter the power of sin within the church community and to live in accordance with God's call to holiness, sin within the community, viewed from this perspective, provides the opportunity to wrestle with accountability, repentance, forgiveness - that is, reconciliation - before and on behalf of the world.

Such active representation of the world to God also comes to light in intercessory prayer. Again, Israel's high priest provided a pattern (Ezra 6:10; Joel 1:13), which is fulfilled by Christ in his ongoing ministry as high priest who intercedes before God (John 17; Rom 8:27). As with confession, in its Christian form, this practice begins with intercession for others within the community. Again, however, intercessory practice also presses on into priestly service of the world as the church community intercedes on behalf of the world which God loves: "by grace we are given to participate in [Christ's] intercession for all humanity. So in our communal worship we are called to be a royal priesthood, bearing in our hearts the sorrows and cares and tragedies of our world as our heavenly High Priest does."⁵¹ Such

⁵⁰ Haydock, *Theology of the Levitical Priesthood*, 79.

⁵¹ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996), 73.

prayers are stirred by the Holy Spirit, and offered in Christ according to the Father's will, as a creative participation in God, "which is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:1-4). In this way, the church community "may represent others to God, not in place of or in addition to Christ, but in dependence upon and with Christ."⁵² ...And will then again turn, under its priestly imperative, to represent God to his world.

Conclusion

It has been my purpose to show that to conceive of either church or mission without the other is entirely untenable. They are interdependent, penultimate concepts which only find their place and meaning in God's final redemption of all heaven and earth. The eschatological new humanity will be a community who together, in Christ, perfectly bears God's image and are eternally turned beyond themselves to God and all creation... and the slippage (grammatical and ontological) between the singular and the communal will finally be resolved. This shift in focus from creation and the individual to eschaton and the communal may have been already largely accomplished within academic theological circles, but for it to more widely formative, both imaginatively and practically, will require rich narratives which have the capacity to recast both church and mission in light of redemption. I have proposed that the canonical narrative of communal and missional priesthood has this potential and integrates, whilst also strengthening rather than compromising, our sense and practice of both church and mission.

⁵² McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election*, 153.