

### **The Organic Church as Parable of Jesus**

Imagine a world in which the church buildings, cathedrals, mega-churches and other structures used for Christian gatherings are no longer, or at least less frequently, the places they once were. Now these buildings are museums, community centers, homeless shelters, theaters and so on. The people that once filled these buildings gather there much less frequently if at all. What now occurs are smaller gatherings in homes, coffee shops and bars that are unique expressions of the Body of Christ in each particular city, culture and nation; expressions of faith that seek to express and work out what it means to follow Jesus in their specific contexts. Large numbers of Christians have left the traditional practices and structures of *going* to church for the option of *being* the church, taking seriously the metaphors of being salt and light. Large portions of the Christian community have intentionally gone underground, not because of persecution, but for the purpose of pursuing and modeling Jesus Christ through a cruciform life. This cross-shaped life calls for a discipline unrivaled by some mystics but also a giving of oneself in love to share in the suffering of others. This desire to commune with God leads to a love of the world on all levels. An ever-expanding network of simple, flexible, mobile fellowships, with no central headquarters, that seeks to be the parable of Jesus Christ for others in the world.

This essay is an attempt to speak of the church as the Body of Christ in light of McFague's metaphorical theology and in relation to our contemporary situation. In the first part of this paper, I will examine McFague's view of metaphor along with Jungel's and the differing conclusions they reach in their respective Christologies. Both of these theologians speak of Jesus as the parable of God and from this point, I will elaborate on the church as a parable of

Christ. I will argue that the understanding one holds to regarding the parable of God, Jesus, will influence the view of the church, as the parable of Jesus and the Body of Christ. In the second part of this paper, I want to play with the ideas of a parabolic ecclesiology that is both organic and disestablished. A current trend among free churches and house churches is an emphasis on the organic as a model for the structure and/or practice of the church. It is in the light of this emerging trend that I will examine Schneider's model of the rhizome as a possible pattern for the church. In the final section of this essay, I will attempt to bring the conversation full circle by engaging these ideas of the parable of Christ emerging in an organic matrix that is for others. At this point, I will turn to the thought of Bonhoeffer as offering insights that will engage the church with the world. In particular, his ideas of "religionless Christianity" and "the church for others" will have a certain bearing on this dialogue.

Sallie McFague writes in *Speaking in Parables* that, "Metaphor is not first of all the language of the poets but ordinary language. We use metaphors all the time in order to say something about things we know little about."<sup>1</sup> McFague wrote this in 1975 and the interest in metaphor in human language continues with Lakoff and Johnson writing of metaphor in similar fashion five years later from the philosophical side tying together language, thought and action.

In *Metaphors We Live By* they state,

...that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature....Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.<sup>2</sup>

So in both the theological and philosophical studies of language, the interest in metaphor roots itself in the everyday world of human living. Lakoff and Johnson pursue this further in relation to empirical studies in cognitive linguistics. While the cognitive science is a secondary aspect

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 43.

<sup>2</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

for McFague, she still understands the metaphorical nature of language rooted in the mundane experience of the human situation. As she describes it, metaphor is “...the way of human knowing.”<sup>3</sup>

Although McFague along with Lakoff and Johnson acknowledge the epistemic qualities of metaphors, McFague takes an approach to metaphor that becomes open-ended, uncertain and risky yet nevertheless needed for theological reflection.<sup>4</sup> She summarizes her understanding of metaphorical language in the following:

...metaphorical language not only connects this with that, here with there, but demands that one partner of the association, at least, be concrete, sensuous, familiar, bodily. It will abide no abstractions, no head without a body, no mystical flights, but because it is the method of human movement it insists on taking along the whole human being in all its familiarity, messiness, and concreteness.<sup>5</sup>

As McFague understands metaphorical language, it is distinctly human, that is, anthropomorphic language and this is unavoidable even in talk of God. This multivocative characteristic of metaphor in religious language carries over into her understanding of parables as well.

McFague’s explication of parables as extended metaphors builds on the previous notion of metaphor. She cites work research in New Testament studies from Funk and Crossan among others with the conclusion that the parables of Jesus offer historically a “more authentic strata in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup> As such, she sees parables as the core of Jesus’ teaching. In *Metaphorical Theology*, she brings characteristics of these parables into focus as drawn from the teaching of Jesus in that the parables are indirect, extravagant and secular.<sup>7</sup> She defines a parable in the following passage: “A parable is a judgment or assertion of similarity and

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<sup>3</sup> McFague, 1975, 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>7</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 44.

difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another: one is the ordinary way of being in the world and the other, the extraordinary way.”<sup>8</sup> It is the contrast of this new way of seeing the world in view of the old that provokes the hearer to a decision in how one should live. She speaks of the parabolic influence on her method of theology as “open-ended, tensive, secular, indirect, iconoclastic, and revolutionary.”<sup>9</sup> Another parabolic influence on theology relates to the content of both parable and theology, that of “relational life.”<sup>10</sup> McFague further elaborates on these characteristics of her understanding of parables in her notion of Jesus as the parable of God.

As McFague applies the approach of parabolic theology to the person of Jesus allowing one to properly interpret Jesus as parable of God and thus provide a parabolic Christology. The starting place is that the life, actions and death of Jesus are essential for and a realignment to a human understanding of God. She offers a parabolic Christology that focuses on three points. The first point is that a parabolic Christology is “from below,” starting from the secular and ordinary. This leads her to conclude the “is and is not” of Jesus as God. The next point is that of relationality. Jesus embodies and models that characteristic in tending to the quality of relational life of others and those on the margins as seen in the healing stories. On this point, McFague emphasizes the need for ethics as an integral part of theology to discern right relations with others. The third point she makes is regarding the radical and unconventional aspects of Jesus’ life as seen in his table fellowship with sinners and outcasts. This is the contrast of the life of the kingdom of God as manifest in Jesus and the accepted social, political, national and religious customs of humanity. This leads her to acknowledge a countercultural (and in a sense, prophetic) response to contemporary culture. So to summarize, in McFague’s parabolic

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Christology of Jesus as a parable of God, Jesus “is and is not” God, he is for others and he is revolutionary.<sup>11</sup> In an interesting way McFague connects the third point of her parabolic Christology to Jesus’ death on the cross. “If Jesus is a parable of God, it is at the cross that the parable will be heard by those who have ears to hear, for here God’s suffering love embraces both the sinner and those sinned against.”<sup>12</sup> It is this view, of the cross and of Jesus as *a* parable of God that I would like to compare with Eberhard Jüngel’s understanding of Jesus as *the* parable of God.

In *God as the Mystery of the World*, Eberhard Jüngel argues that parable is radically different than analogous language of God. To briefly summarize Jüngel’s argument, typical analogies are of the following structure, a:b::c:d. Such language fails in talk of God because one part of the analogy is unknown, namely God. x:b::c:d would cause a failure in correspondence since x and c have no true relation. Jüngel overcomes this failure of analogous language in the following structure, x→b::c:d, with x being the parable that carries one over in an event that in Jüngel’s view is a revelation of something new, the Word of God leading to the new creation. This is an event in language that opens up a new reality to humanity through the Word of God, that is, Jesus as the parable of God.

Eberhard Jüngel likewise speaks in parabolic fashion regarding Jesus of Nazareth. Jüngel addresses this view of Jesus as the parable of God in a section dealing with the place of revelation and event in human language about God. While McFague stops at the cross, Jüngel continues on to the resurrection kerygma of the risen Jesus. “...one can and must say that the man Jesus is the parable of God, understanding the being of the man Jesus on the basis of the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 53

Easter kerygma.”<sup>13</sup> For Jüngel this finds its roots in the distinct Lutheran dogma regarding the incarnation of the Son of God and of Christ as mediator between God and humanity. He further states concerning such analogy:

That man is brought down into a constantly new experience of God’s similarity with us, without being betrayed of something higher in the process, is the function, to be sure, of an ‘analogy which does it work ‘according to the gospel’ (*analogia, kata to euangelion*).<sup>14</sup>

While for McFague, the metaphorical nature of language never corresponds directly about God, with Jüngel, the language event of revelation in the Word of God does correspond. Such an understanding of revelation as a Word-event allows for language to be specific, concrete and no less revolutionary. This specificity of language regarding the person and work of Jesus is by no means less confrontational. In speaking of the process of language’s movement he states that, “What is *expressed* in the form of metaphor and parable, *addresses one*.”<sup>15</sup> He sees this as a renewal of language and a new way of dealing with each other and the world. This is particularly striking with flourishing parables and how such language gain one’s attention and leads to new knowledge. Jüngel states that this is what happens

...when an analogy is at work between the new and the accustomed. Something absolutely alien would not grip one. What grips us is that correspondence which mediates between the unknown and the already known, the foreign and the customary, theology far away and the near, the new and the old. Analogy grips us.<sup>16</sup>

If this is true of Jesus as the parable of God, then we face a decision regarding the person of Jesus in an event that alters one’s life. This event is not something abstract, religious or even mystical but rather something concrete.

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<sup>13</sup> Eberhard Jungel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 288.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

In a parable, language is so focused that the subject of the discourse becomes concrete in language itself and thus defines anew the people addressed in their own existence. Something happens in the parable, and it happens in such a way that then something else happens through the parable. The metaphor already has a tendency toward event, because the metaphor surpasses the directness of indicative speech with its greater concreteness.<sup>17</sup>

McFague holds that metaphor is rooted in everyday language and while Jüngel also holds this notion, living metaphors that speak of the Word of God are even more tangible and bear a great impact on one's life. For Jüngel, metaphor is not a method but the depth and richness of the Word-event. The parable, "...although it speaks the language of the world, speaks at the same time in truth and speaks genuinely of God."<sup>18</sup>

Though McFague and Jungel embrace the use of metaphor for theology, they come to different conclusions based on how they see metaphor and parable functioning in the work of theology. These differences, while yielding differing views of Jesus as the parable of God, when applied to the church as the parable of Jesus can lead to similar conclusions in practice (and possibly structure). Whether one hold a high Christology or a low one, the church as parable of Jesus is in some sense and in one way or another an embodiment of the life and work of Jesus. McFague might provide a caveat that the church is *a* parable as opposed to *the* parable as Jungel would view the metaphor. In either case, the emphasis is on community and right relations, namely loving one another and loving the world. For McFague this is the ethical imperative of metaphorical theology and for Jüngel this is the view of the Word of God making us true and freeing us to love truly. Jungel does not speak extensively of the church but he does allude to it as the community that continues speaking the story of the parable of God. So in a sense, the theology he is doing is in relation to a dogmatics since the church is speaking, it should speak

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 295.

clearly.<sup>19</sup> While McFague is engaged in constructive theology, especially in the light of Gordon Kaufman's call to deconstruct and reconstruct God, Christ and world, she seeks new metaphors for God that are relevant to the world today. Both have a hermeneutical approach to the theological task, with Jüngel being explicit with dogmatics in mind and McFague being implicit with culture, ecology and economics in mind. This correlation between Christology and ecclesiology will also be addressed later in the paper as relates to Bonhoeffer's conception of the church. So where does this leave the church as the parable of Jesus? How does one put metaphor and parable into church practice and structure? In the next section, I will examine two trends within Christianity seeking new ways of expressing the parable of Jesus and how they provide a model of incarnation similar to Laurel Schneider's metaphor of the rhizome.

An important aspect of an organic view of human life, that of play, is brought to light by David H. Jensen as he refers to Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*. Jensen states, "Play itself is subversive to structure, particularly those structures that exclude, dominate and oppress....Its joy is found not in reaching some kind of goal, but in the delight of the others with whom we play."<sup>20</sup> It is on this note that I would like to turn to models of the church and in some way engage playfully with those models. As Jensen also speaks of the sacredness of play, many theologians often overlook this form of paying attention and being. While theology is a serious task of speaking of God, it is the seriousness that often overshadows the joy of being oneself before God. Now let us turn to some playful considerations of models for the church as the parable of Jesus.

McFague distinguishes metaphor and model in the following definition: "A model is a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>20</sup> David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 57.

comprehensive and coherent explanation.”<sup>21</sup> She cites the model of God as father as one such instance. Now depending on which notion of metaphor and parable one holds, the models will also bear themselves out in different ways. If the church is the parable of Jesus as Jesus is the parable of God then what is an appropriate model? Since scripture speaks of the church as the Body of Christ it would seem an organic personal model would be the most fitting. Organic in the sense that the bodies we have function via biological processes and personal in that it is with these bodies that we interact and relate to others. Many models focus on the Body of Christ as a body with Christ as the head and the body subject to the head. While this model is scriptural, it is some ways problematic as far as church structure and practice. The problems of hierarchy, patriarchy and many another -archy are evident in strict structure and practice based on a literal and almost mechanistic interpretation of the body model. I am closer to an anarchist when it comes to church structure and with this in mind, I would like to propose an alternative model that would take the freedom and equality before God in a serious yet playful way. This model is tied to the notion of the rhizome as raised by Schneider in *Beyond Monotheism*.

As Schneider elaborates on the multiplicity of the divine, she turns to a final “proximal mark” of this multiplicity that she speaks of as “a-centered relationality.”<sup>22</sup> This a-centered relationality reveals the multiple emergences and incarnations of the divine in the state of becoming in the universe. Since this relationality entails multiple centers of growth Schneider adopts the model of the rhizome as drawn from botany. As she defines rhizome she states that, “It narrowly refers to those plants that propagate by expansion rather than by seed dispersion. They generate new plants ‘from the middle of the body.’”<sup>23</sup> This is a characteristic of plants

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<sup>21</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

such as bamboo, ginger and ferns. Even more pointedly, she speaks of divinity and incarnation in terms of rhizome in the following:

Divine multiplicity is not an origin, or a center. Incarnation—the positive experiential confession of God-with-us—is a rhizome, following lines of occurrence, centering, deterritorializing, decentering, and reterritorializing all that it encounters.<sup>24</sup>

She even compares this incarnational rhizome to the birth of the church on Pentecost in the book of Acts. Although this rhizome model lacks a center or origin, it does have a connectedness through the various offshoots that emerge from the nodes. In a sense it could be compared to a fishers' net that is alive with each knot or node connected with several others and no ends or edges to the net since it is constantly forming new offshoots. This lack of center in the Pentecost story speaks of divine multiplicity revealed in the church. Schneider states, "This is not a centered tale but it is one of generative connections coming sideways. New beginnings—indeed, the beginning of a global movement—occurs here rhizomorphically out of the middle of a feast on a busy street."<sup>25</sup> Now such a model might offend traditional church folk, but this rhizomorphic model bears witness to the testimony of the early Christian church in structure and practice.

Consider the work of Paul among the churches which follows a pattern similar to that of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul comes to a city, he preaches and teaches the gospel message, some people believe the message in faith, he gathers and instructs the faithful for a time and then he leaves. Out of the middle of a city, a community emerges as a manifestation of divine multiplicity. This manifestation of the church is an expression of a-centered relationality that is left alone to grow and expand in a unique way relative to its context. This brings up an issue regarding the uniqueness of each church in relation to its culture. In many instances, cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 180.

distinctions play only a superficial part in flavoring a church in a particular culture. While some may find comfort in a uniformity of church structure and worship, I believe this misses an important point regarding our relation to our social context. Monica A. Coleman, in summarizing Whiteheadian process thought, speaks of the differing forms and details of God's vision per each context. As such, "Each community's embrace of God's vision will look different."<sup>26</sup> Applying the rhizome model to the church will lead to such differences. The deterritorializing of the gospel to a new city/culture leads to a reterritorializing of that message in the multiplicity of the church. Adopting such a model for the Body of Christ I believe will lead to deeper cultural manifestation of the incarnation and a richer expression of the incarnation in and to the culture. One could easily see this rhizomorphic model of the church leading to another metaphor, that of a tapestry: a unique expression of divine multiplicity across nations and cultures that forms a colorful knot work pattern revealing an incarnational multiplicity as a parable of Jesus.

The emerging church is a recent development in North American Christianity. While it is a dialogue with post-modern culture, it often reinterprets the traditional language of the church in rather non-traditional ways. In his examination of emerging churches, Bill Easum speaks of the decentralization of Christianity in the following:

Because Christianity lost its privileged position in society, it has been forced to decentralize its ministry and mission in order to penetrate a fractured, alienated, and hostile society....the emerging church asks people to be the church in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Even with the advent of the internet, information and wide varieties of social interaction are now greatly decentralized by how the very nature of the internet works. Once upon a time, the church

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<sup>26</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Easum and Bill Tenny-Brittain, *Under the Radar: Learning from Risk-Taking Churches*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 106.

was central to the small town life. With the growth of cities and suburbs, the church is no longer, at least geographically, at the center.

As a leader in the emergent church movement, Peter Rollins in *How (Not) to Speak of God* describes the structure and leadership of Ikon as akin to a doughnut. Rollins states, “Just as a doughnut has no interior, but is made up entirely of an exterior, so Ikon has no substantial doctrinal centre.”<sup>28</sup> The emphasis is not on some certain Christian teaching but on relations. This continues in his elaboration of the leadership of Ikon. “This does not mean that there is no leadership, but rather that the role of the leadership team is to help support, serve and develop the relationships that organically arise from the group.”<sup>29</sup> This notion of organic leadership is not limited to groups who consider themselves as emergent but also in the house church movement. In similar fashion, Frank Viola speaks of this type of leadership in the following: “...the New Testament notion of leadership is rooted in a *functional mind-set*. It portrays authority in terms of how things work organically....In the functional leadership framework, the church operates by life—divine life.”<sup>30</sup> In this functional view of leadership, leaders emerge either naturally over time and/or in response to some crisis. I heard a story, I am not sure where, of how such leadership would be recognized. After a period of time a church planter returned to the community he established. The question of leadership and elders came up. Since the church planter desired to see an organic expression of the church he posed the following question. He simply asked, “If you were caught having an affair or some other moral indiscretion, who would you turn to for help and guidance?” The group unanimously recognized all the same people.

In one of the first articles read, Jensens’ “Whose Conversation?” addresses the issue of the church in a way that echoes the metaphorical theology of McFague, his former teacher. He

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 154.

speaks of the disestablishment of the church as not lamentable but as “an opportunity for faithfulness with others.”<sup>31</sup> Jensen takes such decentering as a response to Empire, whether political, economic or cultural that severs dialogue and oppresses others. He characterizes this disestablishment in light of McFague’s call back to pre-Constantinian Christianity but not in a sectarian sense but rather, “it is a call for Christian participation in society in a more robust way.”<sup>32</sup> This allows for dialogue with culture rather than monologue. So with a church that seeks not to be established, but seeks to speak to others and be for others, this opens the church in new and different ways than traditionally understood. Jensen states, “Freed from Christendom, the church might finally become the ec-clesia, those called out from the world, to the world, to live in God’s reign.”<sup>33</sup> This is a sentiment that Dietrich Bonhoeffer espoused in both his theological work and in his life. His was a conception of the church for others in the world that was theologically grounded in the person of Jesus and fleshed out in his life as he followed Jesus.

Bonhoeffer, regarding the issue of authority in the church and implicitly the matter of church structure, raises an interesting point in *The Communion of Saints* that I will quote in its entirety.

For us the church’s entire claim to authority derives solely from the authority of the Word. Thus the idea of the priesthood of all believers remains the principle upon which the church is built. No empirical body ‘in itself’ has a claim to authority over the church. Every claim derives its authority from the Word. It seems to me that the necessary conclusion is that the church should become independent, that is, be disestablished; but we must leave this question here.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David H. Jensen, “Whose Conversation?” in *Theology That Matters*, 11-25, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>34</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), 185.

This quote raises two important issues that I will return to later in this paper. The first is the issue of the priesthood of all believers, the Lutheran ecclesial doctrine of distinction, and the second is the disestablishment of the church. Both of these issues return in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. As I understand Bonhoeffer, I read this passage as the seeds for a future free church understanding of church structure.

While this previous passage deals with notions of freedom and power in the church, the following passages deal more closely with the church in a secular culture and its place in the midst of that culture. The following comes in the middle of a conversation regarding “religionless Christianity.” Bonhoeffer writes, “The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village.”<sup>35</sup> Per Bonhoeffer, this is a call for the church to return to the centrality and supremacy of Christ in all things. Along similar lines he states, “In the place of religion there now stands the church – that is in itself biblical – but the world is in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that is the mistake!”<sup>36</sup> And again, “The church must come out of its stagnation. We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life.”<sup>37</sup> In this continuing dialogue regarding religionless Christianity, Bonhoeffer is not advocating a dismissal of the church, which would be a mistaken understanding. Rather, he is addressing the engagement of the church with the world in such a way that one no longer views the church as a religious institution but a place of freedom in dialogue with the world and speaking to the life problems of a secular culture. It is in

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<sup>35</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers From Prison*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 282.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

my understanding that such previously mentioned ideas are in line with a general notion of free church theology.

Now turning to his book outline, he further expands on these ideas. While he states that the ideas are “very crude and condensed”, I believe they provide a continued trajectory for his thought regarding the future of the church. The first two chapters deal with “A Stocktaking of Christianity” and “The Real Meaning of Christian Faith.” This would have been his response, both critical and constructive, of Christian faith in a secular age. Chapter 3 was to be his conclusion and, in particular, in relation to the church. I will quote the passage in full.

The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others.<sup>38</sup>

Maybe this is Bonhoeffer's out working of an issue he raised but did not address in *The Communion of Saints*, that of the disestablishment of the church. The response here is what he sees as a possible conclusion to earlier notions that one could roughly call “free church.” This notion of the “free church” rests on two ideas, freedom of all members of the church in light of the priesthood of all believers and the freedom of the church from the influence of the state (and vice versa). This also bears some similarity to the Anabaptist idea of the believer’s church, that of believers voluntarily associating together in freedom without outside coercion. One could argue that Bonhoeffer’s thought was heading in this direction with the origin of the Confessing Church in Germany and possibly even beyond that expression of the church as his letters seem to indicate. As a separate branch of the State Lutheran Church, the Confessing Church was seeking two things: to be free from the influence of the German government and free to worship together

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 382-382.

under the Word. The Lutheran pastors who sought to distance themselves from and oppose the Nazi ideology that had ascended at the time one could consider a manifestation of the free church mentality.

As McFague has argued throughout her works for theology to provoke Christians so as to love the entirety of the world, so too Bonhoeffer sees the church as that embodiment of Jesus that is for others. While some have misinterpreted his later theological work as an eschewing of both God and church I tend to think that it reinforces his faith as a Christian in the world. At the root of his thought as a Lutheran is that of the incarnation of God. For Bonhoeffer, who holds a higher Christology in some sense than McFague, it is this high view of Jesus as Christ that motivates his engagement with the world. From the beginning of his theological work, he sought to enter into dialogue with the contemporary culture with the Christian faith and message.

From *The Communion of Saints* to the *Letters and Papers*, Bonhoeffer's thought regarding the church is strikingly consistent. It is only in his later writings that the sphere of the church expands to embrace the entire world. The enlarged scope is partially based on the life of discipleship that Bonhoeffer held that bore out in his theological work.<sup>39</sup> Many of his later statements regarding the church must be taken in light of his deep involvement in the world as he struggled to answer the question of his own faith.<sup>40</sup> David H. Hopper summarizes the theology of Bonhoeffer in the following:

At the end, Bonhoeffer's statement of faith and his humanity were not very different from the faith and humanity of the long nineteen hundred years of Christian history. And it is this Bonhoeffer--not the restless, provocative theologian--who is likely to strengthen and nurture the faith of the church.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>41</sup> David H. Hopper, *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 144.

On this note, I tend to agree with Hopper. While Bonhoeffer's life engaged both the Christian faith and the world, he held to both without excluding either.

As McFague understands metaphor in an open ended way, Jungel's specificity of meaning in metaphor along with Bonhoeffer's conception of the church leads to a radical inclusive exclusivity found in Jesus as the Christ. If the church is the parable of Jesus, then this inclusive exclusivity will be manifest in the Body of Christ. The inclusivity of this understanding is that the church is open to all humanity and by implication to all of creation. The exclusivity is that it is in and through the work of Jesus Christ that this inclusivity is accomplished. While some might preclude such an approach as too individualistic, I believe if the salvific work stops at the individual that is the problem. Each person is in relation and in a context and it seems to follow that if a person changes and/or is changed; this will bear some impact on this context and relations. So for Jungel (and implicitly Bonhoeffer) the idea of Jesus as the parable of God is something very specific and it is related to confession of Jesus as the Christ. Even with such a dogmatic view of the church, this can be put into practice in a way that is relevant for the contemporary situation. This is put into practice via the church as understood as the Body of Christ. Bonhoeffer has such a strong connection between Christology and ecclesiology that he almost collapses ecclesiology into Christology. If the church is the parable of Jesus then the church is likewise something very specific, it is the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> This strong correlation is the church's strength and weakness. Its strength is in actually being a reality that expresses the Word of God. And this expression can be its weakness in that it does not effectively communicate that Word in language or actions relevant to the surrounding culture.

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<sup>42</sup> See also *Act and Being* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He goes into detail regarding the role of revelation in and through the church.

This is expressed in terms of free church and free state by Nigel Wright. In his book *Free Church, Free State*, he characterizes the church as a model in that,

If the church is called in Christ to be the first fruits of a new humanity, an expression of the way of living that pleases God and promotes human flourishing, then the Christian community must in some way and in some measure display in its social existence a pattern for the rest of humanity.<sup>43</sup>

Though writing from a particular Baptist perspective, Wright stresses the importance of freedom and order in the church stating that, “freedom has been paramount, freedom in the first instance from ‘sacred power,’ simply to be the church under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to do those things its Lord asks of it as they are interpreted by a properly informed conscience.”<sup>44</sup> This entails a free society that draws from the model of the church. This is problematic when the church blindly adopts the worldly system, baptizes it and declares, “This too is Christian.” This was the problem raised with Constantine and it is now the problem of the church in North America. While freedom is important in Christian life and theology, wisdom is needed to balance this against individualistic self-interest and emphasize the need for right and just relations we find ourselves in.

This “in the world but not of the world” attitude that is evident in McFague and Bonhoeffer with slightly different emphases calls for a certain level of commitment to and engagement with the world. Eleazar Fernandez also reflects this attitude in “The Church as a Household of the Life Abundant.” He reflects on this attitude in economic terms in light of the Christian notion of resident aliens in which he states, “They do not escape from this world but affirm both being in the world and not letting the world define them.”<sup>45</sup> In the economic terms raised by Fernandez the Christian must prophetically address, exorcise and resist the world

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<sup>43</sup> Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2005), xxi.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Eleazar S. Fernandez, “The Church as a Household of the Life Abundant” in *Theology That Matters*, 172-188, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 178.

system of the free market, global capitalism and the idol of consumerism.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the church must engage in an alternative expression of the world system that is at once subversive but also constructive. As Fernandez reimagines the Eucharist at a common table symbolizing “openness, service and hospitality” that should infiltrate churches as the faith community seeks an alternative expression to the world. Along with reinterpreted Eucharist celebrations, Fernandez sees the aspects of liturgy, spiritual formation, Christian education, renewed narrative and ecumenical dialogue as important steps along the way to the church as a countercultural community. He states in the conclusion this hopeful passage of liberation and transformation.

The new church is visible and audible for those who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. And this new church is not outside of us; we carry it in our hearts. That church is growing this minute. It is emerging out of the old. It will not come, however, by itself, but only through our concerted efforts. Let our politically engaged spirituality usher its coming! Let our conspiracy of social imagination and transformation be a midwife for its birthing<sup>47</sup>

Granted one could argue that this is not a new church but a new expression of the church for these times. For those who are perceptive can see this fresh expression rising like a phoenix from the ashes of old structures and practices. This is a collective effort that can bring to fruition a different way of being and acting in the world, a way radically different than the world’s traditions. One can see this way of living as a new expression of following Jesus for the present day and into the future.

Now on this note one can look again at the rhizome model as a providing great potential for the future of the church. If one holds to a minimal tradition and structure with no leadership from above but naturally arising from within the congregation and practice that involves the participation of all, such a model may be a better expression of the church for a post-modern, post-secular and post-Christian cultural. With this minimal structure and organic leadership, the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 188.

rhizomorphic church provides some advantages over a traditional institutional church. Without the overhead of a church building and campus, this allows for less financial obligations in building maintenance and more finances for reaching out to those on the margins. This also holds true in regard to paid pastoral leadership. On this model, the leadership is functional rather than that of an office, it is along side church members not above them. Another advantage of not having a building is the freedom, flexibility and mobility for when the church gathers, whether for worship or ministry. The gathering church can meet in a living room, at a coffee shop, in a forest clearing or at the beach. This high mobility can also allow for greater responsiveness to meeting the needs of those on the margins or those who are victims of natural disasters. The freedom and flexibility on this model will also allow for a unique expression of the Body of Christ that is relevant to and reflective of the surrounding cultural context. The freedom of such a church also allows for a greater prophetic voice to speak to the powers that be and oppose the systemic evil in the world. Being outside of any state church or beyond the control of any government, such a divine embodiment has a potential to be a thorn in the side of those in power (as it should be). It is in the similarity to a grassroots movement that such influence can be exercised in bringing about revolutionary change. Likewise, at the economic level, such a model can provide an alternative way of following the house rules. While free market capitalism and totalitarian communism provide no easy answers, I believe such intentional communities can model an alternative economy that could have influence at a larger level. Ultimately, I believe such a model turns traditional understandings of church structure and practice on its head. And it is the head, Jesus Christ, the church needs to return to as she becomes a radical expression of love that has no fear of suffering for and alongside others.