

# THE RE-ENVISIONING OF THE CHURCH

*David White*

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*THE LATE DAVID WHITE PRESENTS  
AN INSPIRATIONAL CALL FOR THE RE-  
ENVISIONING OF THE CHURCH, SETTING  
OUR HERITAGE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF  
GOD'S WORK, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE,  
AND SETTING OUR EVANGELISM WITHIN  
THE CONTEXT OF THE FULL MISSION OF  
GOD IN CHRIST.*

Epworth Old Rectory - Aldersgate - Bristol New Room - Hanham Mount - Gwennap Pit: how these places stir the blood! We love them because of their connection with our beloved Wesleys. We trace their steps in loving pilgrimage; we spend time hoping something of their zeal will rub off on us through the very hallowed walls and stones of the buildings used by them. We seek inspiration from those who are dead, yet still speak. We look back over our history and cry out, 'O Lord, [we] have heard the report of you, and your work ... In the midst of the years, revive it.' (Habakkuk 3.2, ESV) What we would give for God to raise up folk like the Wesleys now! Or like John Cennick! We'd love a Donald English or a Rob Frost to lead us out of the mire of moral compromise we find ourselves in and bring us to the sunny uplands of assured convictions and Spirit-honouring evangelism. We'd love to see our church grow.

In 2 Kings 2:1ff, we read these moving words, 'Now when the Lord God was about to take Elijah up to heaven'. But before he goes Elijah, accompanied by his disciple, Elisha, decides he must visit all the old places (Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, the Jordan)—all his old haunts: one last long lingering look at the

places God came to him and used him to spread the fame of his name. In these places resided 'schools of prophets': Gilgal was the first stopping place after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan under Joshua's leadership (Joshua 4:19-24); Bethel was the place where Jacob first encountered God (Genesis 28:10-19); and Jericho was the first city that Joshua and the Israelites conquered (Joshua 6:1-21). The trouble was, some of these holy places (Bethel especially—see 1 Kings 12:28-29) had been given over to false worship and idolatry. Even the best of places in our history can become corrupted. History doesn't guarantee continuity of blessing; places where the Lord's praises were sung heartily can all too readily become sites filled with the excesses of Baal worship. Was Elijah coming face to face with his failures? And yet there are places in the earth that will always move us more than others because of their associations; but soon it comes to pass that 'behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated [Elijah from Elisha] and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven' (2 Kings 2:11).

So Elisha is left, alone on the banks of the river Jordan. He is desolate. He looks down and sees the cloak of Elijah lying at his feet. He has a choice. Perhaps he could wave the cloak above his head invoking its owner. Perhaps he could wear it as a badge of office to the waiting prophets observing his every move. This is the decisive moment of his life: he has to face the indifferent, the cursed Jezebel, the wretched pagan society all around him. I am sure he feels inadequate, even though he has received a double portion of Elijah's spirit. So much is against him. He looks at the mantle again - is this where Elijah's power lay? Could he kid others that he was just like Elijah - after all he had his cloak?

But no! Not for him a dead memory! Not for him a dead prophetic tradition even! Instead, bravely, he doesn't invoke Elijah but the God of Elijah! 'Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' (2 Kings 2:14) That's it, my brothers and sisters: we don't need John or Charles, or any other luminary - we need their God! We are not locked into the past. We need to know the power of their God visiting us once more, restoring and revitalising the church, till it become again 'terrible, as an army with banners' (Song of Solomon 6:10). This is what the Lord wants from his battered and besieged people: to trust him that what is impossible with humans is possible with him; to know that, though the forecast is bleak, even then our faith in the risen and reigning Christ will change everything; to realise that Christ our Lord has promised to build his church (see Matthew 16:18) and nothing will stop this desire of his. The powers of darkness cannot prevail against this church that our Lord is building - a very real expression of his body, animated with the Holy Spirit, sent into all the world to bring earth and heaven together in such a glorious demonstration of transforming, triumphant reconciliation that the Lord God who once walked in the cool of the garden, seeking the company of those he had created, may once again have a people he can call his own - after which the whole world will be as filled with the knowledge of his glory as the Atlantic is wet.

#### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

It is a huge and common mistake to think that the church emerges from its past. That way we are more interested in resuscitation than resurrection. When a church tries to be contemporary it usually arrives ten years late! No, the renewed church, the church that Jesus is building, emerges into the present from its future. It was Barth who helpfully explained this: since God is the measure of all reality, we see eternity exists before time, and therefore the future before the present - just as the Creator comes before the creature (see his Church Dogmatics, Volume 1, part 1, page 53 trans GW Bromiley 2nd edition). Surely this is why we pray, in part, that 'As in heaven so on earth' in the prayer that Jesus taught us: since there is no sin, sickness, demons, death, disaster, disunity in heaven, and since we are going to know all this fully, can we have some of it now? The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews said it like this: 'we have tasted ... of the powers of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:5). The church, just like the 'called-out ones' who make up its members, is in a state of becoming. You can cheekily say from this perspective that we have read the end of the book and we win!

Very well then, the church is the ekklesia of God, the called and summoned ones, whom God is gathering into his family. We are those who have been called out of death, darkness, and sin to have a relationship with the Father and the Son by the Spirit; we are those who, having been called by Jesus, are to spend time with him, before we go from him, only to come back to him to spend time with him in a continuing cycle of discipleship. We are called to a future and glorious inheritance. We are God's special people for his own possession (1 Peter 2:9; John 17:3; Mark 3:14; 1 Peter 5:10; and Deuteronomy 7:6)



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According to John 17, this church has an eightfold purpose: 1) to glorify God; 2) to keep God's Word intact so as we can pass it on to others 'undiluted'; 3) to be united in love; 4) to be filled with joy; 5) to overcome Satan; 6) to be in the world but not of it; 7) to bring others to Christ through the sharing of the gospel; 8) to be with Jesus in his glory for ever. And if we ask how this is all to come about, we need look no further than the staggering last verse of John 17 where Jesus prays to the Father that we might actually know, experience and enjoy the same love that he, the Father, has for the Son. Astonishing! Such an incentive to enter into all the riches God has for us.

#### THE TRINITARIAN AND CHARISMATIC NATURE OF THE CHURCH

God is Trinity, in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in an eternal companionship of giving, sharing and preferring each other above self. We are made in this God's image, and through the reconciling work of Christ, we are destined to share the very life of the Trinity. It follows, then, that the church, Christ's body on earth, should reflect this reality. It is a high and exulted call; and it is not always easy to grasp. But much flows from it:

The church is oriented to the other both in fellowship and mission, seeking to express the outgoing love of God for the least, the last, the little and the dead. We exist to see the lost gathered safely home. As Charles Wesley wrote, 'The arms of love that compass me would all mankind embrace'.

We are the anointed herald of God's kingdom, of God's right to rule over sin, sickness, demons, death, disaster and disunity - so much so that wherever we find such, we know what God's will is; and, praying and acting in the opposite spirit, we seek God's kingdom to come on earth. We heal, cast out demons, feed, house and clothe the poor, and we preach the great good news of Christ's saving rescuing love because all of these are what defines the Father's business, and our Lord and Master has made it clear for all time, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21).

In our fellowship we are dynamically structured, making room for all the gifts and ministries of the Spirit. We see the gifts of the Spirit not as badges of maturity, or impressive awards, but as tools to get the Father's will done. We cry out for conformity to Christ our Saviour and long for his character - 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5: 22,23) to grow in us - the proper sign of maturity, the harvest of his gracious work in us. We practice the priesthood of all believers recognising that all leadership is about the betterment of God's people.

Knowing that we cannot do this on our own, knowing that we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit daily we cry out with Charles Wesley, 'Come, Almighty, to deliver / Let us all thy grace receive.'

And we recognise that when Jesus set us free, forgiving the very sins our consciences were afraid of, clothing us in his righteousness, he did not set us free to do what we like. It's his church and we are members of his body, and he is the head. We are held captive to the word of God - we are set free to do

what he wants – and in the Bible we have God’s word written. John Wesley said it like this:

*I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He hath written it down in a book. Give me that book; at any price give me the book of God! I have it; here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book. I sit down alone; only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end to find the way to heaven.*

*From the Preface to John Wesley’s Sermons on Several Occasions*

Worship is our delight and praying our fuel. But how thrilled we are to know that, within the Trinity itself, we have One praying for us, who not only perfects our prayers, but our praises too. In a staggering insight, the writer to the Hebrews describes the church as being led in worship of Jesus by none other than Jesus himself (Hebrews 2:12) – and this assembly is surrounded by ‘innumerable angels in festal gathering’ (Hebrews 12:22).

### THE NEWNESS OF THE CHURCH

In this company of ‘the-born-again-into-a-living-hope’ (1 Peter 1:3) who seek to follow Jesus for the good of the world, there is a delightful sense of newness. In John’s first epistle, the apostle reminds us:

- We have a new obedience
- We have a new love for God
- We have a new hatred for sin
- We have a new love for our brothers and sisters
- We have a new peace
- We have a new enemy
- But we have a new power over evil

(1 John 2:3; 2:15; 3:9; 3:14; 3:21; 5:18,19; and 5:4)

Much of our knowledge and experience of church life (let’s be honest) doesn’t reflect this. We live in a grey world, whereas God wants a multicoloured polychromatic universe, restored to glory. We settle for a dull predictability, whereas God wants his Spirit to break out all over the place in exuberance and creativity. We glibly pronounce the blessing at the end of our services, not expecting much to happen, whereas God wants heaven to touch earth. We have never come to terms with what God has promised – that he wants to accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or think ... where? In the church and in Christ Jesus (see Ephesians 3:20, 21). It has made shocking little difference to us that the risen triumphant Christ lives in us. There is often nothing about the church which leaves the non-Christian guessing, nothing that strikes him or her as remarkable. There is little in us that he or she doesn’t feel equally capable of being and doing. It is only when the quality of our life baffles the non-believing world; when what is in us can only be explained by the power of the Living Christ living in us that the world’s interest is aroused. Do you remember the glorious sense of newness you experienced when first

you came to Christ? We were new creations revelling in our recreation and renewal. From what heights we have fallen! Lord, renew us again for Christ’s sake!

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER IN FAITH

In Wesley’s journal we read the following

*About three in the morning as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, in so much that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.’*

*From John Wesley’s Journal, 1 January 1739*

I confess to having a real bugbear: it’s when I sit in meetings and hear someone say, ‘Be with us’ or ‘We come into your presence’. I wonder where they have been, as my Bible says we can’t go anywhere without God already being there waiting for us (Psalm 139:7-12). You see, the Lord can’t help being with us! I know what is meant, but such poor theology will rob us of enjoying all that God has for us. God is with us – and he is with us unalterably, inalienably, gloriously, and completely.

This is more than the mere recognition of God’s omnipresence. The Spirit has come to stay. And when he stays he stays not as something static (like a battery which runs down) but as someone dynamic—as living water, as blowing wind, as soothing oil poured out, and as burning fire.

Think of the image used by Ezekiel, in Ezekiel chapter 47. There he talks of the Spirit being like a river. It’s deep water, he says, to swim in. Stand by any river, and which ‘bit’ of the river remains static? You can’t remain by the same ‘bit’ of river – the water moves and hurries past you. Likewise with the Lord, the Spirit: it’s not in his nature to lie low. You can’t have a dormant Holy Spirit! The river of God is full of water. If the wind of God doesn’t blow, it’s not wind. If the fire doesn’t burn, it has no flames and it’s not fire!

My brothers and sisters, it’s just a little bit ludicrous to think of God as being anything but at the height of his powers. He is always hot, never lukewarm in his affections. We talk of the Wesleyan Revival as if it is an extraordinary work of God. Well, that only makes sense if we look at it from a human point of view. It makes no sense to think of God in his very nature as sometimes exerting himself; and at others, because he is tired for example, to be just ‘ticking over’. But he does nothing by halves. He always acts in the full zest of his boundless love and his energetic power and his changeless character. The problem with so-called ‘dead’ churches is not that God has failed to keep his promise, but that dead people don’t recognise his presence with them. Jacob woke up and exclaimed, ‘God is in this place and I knew it not.’ (Genesis 28:16). If you read carefully the account in John’s Gospel, you will see that Jesus is actually listening when Thomas said he didn’t believe Jesus was alive (John 20:24ff).



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As much as he ever was with the Apostles, or as much as he was with the Wesleys, he is with us. As much as he is manifested in the greatest revival, he is with us now. Whatever we feel—it is not our awareness that brings Jesus near.

Where is the God of Elijah? Where is the God of Charles Wesley? Where is the God of wonders who is always calling the lost home? He is right here – when will we trust he is always the same for us and act upon such knowledge?

I began this section with a quotation from John Wesley’s Journal. Six months later we read,

*We met at Fetter Lane to humble ourselves before God ... we acknowledged we had grieved him by our manifold divisions ... In that hour, we found God with us as at the first. Some fell prostrate upon the ground. Others burst out, as with one consent, into loud praise and thanksgiving. And many openly testified, there had been no such day as this since January the first preceding.*

*From John Wesley’s Journal, July 1739; my emphasis.*

The Resurrected Christ is here, always here. Reckon on that fact. Step out in it. And his life is moving among us. God will move as we move out in faith.

### CONCLUSION

A dear old saint once said that 1 Thessalonians 1:1-6 are some of the happiest words ever written. He went on to say that there would be no troubles in the church or the world if we emulated the Thessalonians in their ‘work of faith’, ‘labour of love’ and ‘patient hope’. This gospel that the Thessalonians received came to them not only in word ‘but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance.’ The result was that the fact that the Thessalonians had ‘turned to God from idols’ became well known ‘not only in

Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place [their] faith in God [had] gone forth’. That’s what God wants to see happen in our churches too.

How hope-filled are you that God can change the church so that it resembles a glorious bride, without any blemish (see Ephesians 5:27 & Revelation 21:2)? I once saw a cartoon which exactly described the power of biblical hope (believing that God, who is good, and only good, will keep to his word, and bring about his purposes). There were three frames: in the first, there was just a picture of a snail; in the second, a picture of a huge boulder falling from the sky, about to crush the snail to pieces; and in the third, it is the rock that lies in smithereens as the snail just gets on with its snailish life.

No matter how dark it gets, no matter how hard the forces of darkness press on us, the Lord will build his church. Alleluia.

*The Revd Canon David White, who died of Pneumonia with Covid in December 2021, was an Anglican Clergyman who served a number of parishes, including St Michael le Belfrey, York; Holy Trinity, St Austell; and St Andrew’s, Chorleywood. Deeply inspired by the Wesleys, he was for many years an Associate Member of MET. He is survived by his ‘best-beloved’ Ruth, their three sons, two daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren. His writing continues to be made available on his website, [OfferingTheLight.com](http://OfferingTheLight.com)*

