

COMMON DREAMS

BRISBANE

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CONFERENCE PAPER

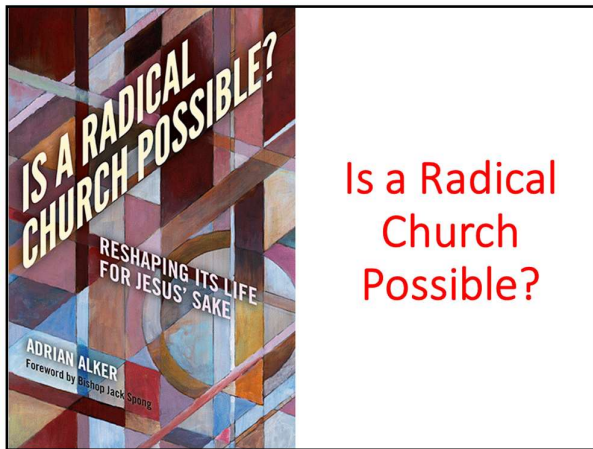


Adrian Alker

ELECTIVE-PRESENTATION

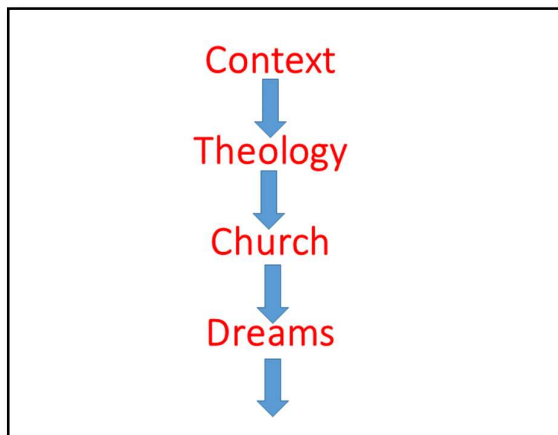
Is a Radical Church Possible?

ADRIAN ALKER



Is a Radical Church Possible?

Thank you for choosing to come to this presentation which I hope will be a conversation around the themes of this title, 'Is a Radical Church Possible?'. We have just one hour to sort out the Church, one hour to discuss this word radical, one hour to share our experiences of the place of religion in our societies, one hour to share our common dreams. Well if Usain Bolt can run 100 metres in 9.81 seconds, at this year's Olympics, an hour seems such a luxury of time!



And so this is the ground I want to try and cover with you over the next 60 minutes:

To look at context – where are we coming from – geographically, religiously, emotionally To touch base with theology – what are the assumptions I am making today?

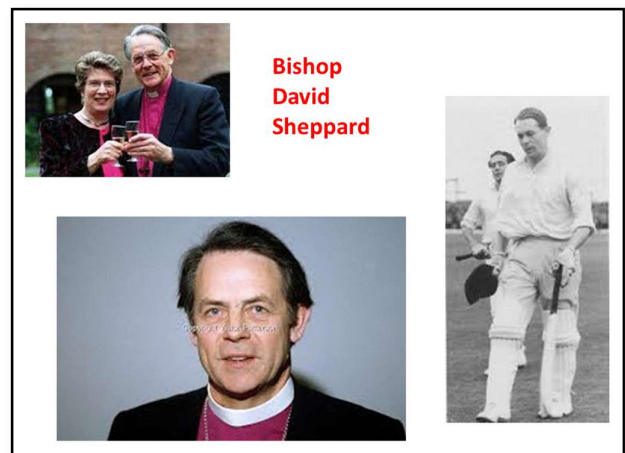
To focus on the Church – its glories and its shame

To Dream about the possibilities and the direction of travel, especially, in regard to spirituality

Context

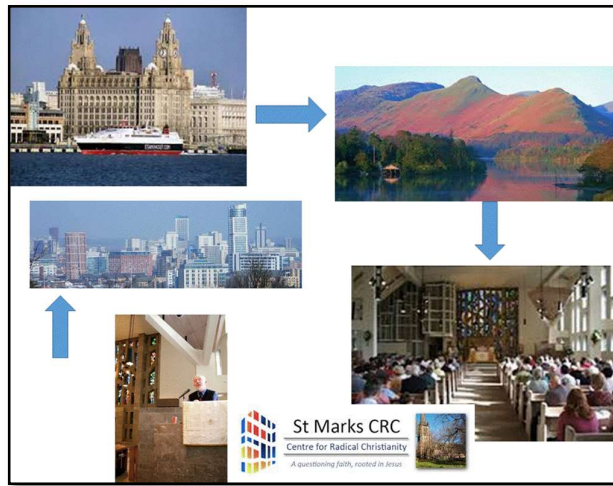


So I am a Lancastrian from northern England, but since 1988 marooned in Yorkshire, our deadly rivals, and have served as a priest in the C of E since my ordination in Liverpool Cathedral in 1979. I was ordained by one of the finest human beings, who happened to be a bishop and happened to be a great cricketer, captaining England and well known here in Australia, David Sheppard. (As a complete aside during the second Test at Melbourne in 1963 he dropped two catches and the story goes that one couple in Australia, where Sheppard filled cathedrals during these tours, asked Mrs. Sheppard – Grace – if the Reverend could christen their baby, but she advised them not to ask him as he was bound to drop the child).



Influenced by the passionate advocacy which Bishop Sheppard showed for the poor in the UK and seeing the Christian faith modelled on Jesus the Good Shepherd, I have been fortunate to experience 37 years of fulfilment in the Church of England, seeing its potential for Good and I hope not being blind to its failures and shortcomings. Four years in Liverpool where religion mattered in

this great Catholic – Protestant city, 5 years working with young people in the English Lake District with visits to Taize and a memorable visit to Madras, tasting that part of the worldwide church and then 20 years in Sheffield where I helped to found the Centre for Radical Christianity with Marcus Borg as our first speaker back in the year 2000. Finally, on to 6 years in a kind of middle management job in the Diocese of Leeds, helping to push up the agenda of the churches issues such as the environment, interfaith, social justice, disability and other areas of concern in our world today.



So that's a little bit of where I am coming from. But what about you? Marcus Borg in his lecture always used to ask his audiences about their own church affiliation and so forth. So may I ask first of all where we have travelled from?.....What theological label might we be comfortable to have? - conservative, evangelical, liberal, radical, inclusive, progressive?

Have we a church belonging? Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, Unitarian, Pentecostalist?. Do we have a dream for the church?.....

I don't apologize for spending time on context since of course all our experiences of religion and church, our dreams and our nightmares come out of who each one of us is and it seems to me that the most important task of any church minister is to get to know really well the folk in that community and for people to really feel that they are known, known by name and understood for who they are.....

Theology

So many authors, academics and church leaders of our present generation call for a re-imagining of Christianity, a wish to radically change the church, they assert that Christianity must change or die, they urge us to read the Bible again for the first time, to meet Jesus again for the first time – all of these recognizable themes can be characterized as a warning sign that for too long Christianity has been marked by the movement from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith.

We know the territory and there is little point today in rehearsing this landscape, save to say that of course the charismatic Jewish sect which formed around Jesus of Nazareth could never have foreseen how two thousand years of history have shaped and reshaped a Christian faith which claims to take its roots from the same Jesus of Nazareth.



Keith Ward, 'Rethinking Christianity'

• Six major changes

- from Jewish messianic sect to gentile universal church,
- 4-8th centuries doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation develop
- 12 – 14th centuries doctrines of purgatory, atonement and the establishment of papal supremacy in the west;
- the Protestant reformation of the 16th century,
- the changes wrought by the European enlightenment and critical enquiry
- Global context of faith in 20th century

Keith Ward, for many years Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, in his book, Re-thinking Christianity highlights six major changes from this Jewish messianic sect to gentile universal church, 4th – 8th centuries development of doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, 12th – 14th century comes the development of doctrines of atonement and purgatory, and the establishment of papal supremacy in the west; the Protestant reformation of the 16th century, the changes wrought by the European enlightenment and critical enquiry, 20th century rethinking in terms of the global context of faiths.

It is in this 5th phase of critical enquiry, coming to its fruit in I suppose in the 19th century, where the historical study of Jesus has had profound effects on Christian theology, on the central doctrines of

incarnation, atonement and redemption. To emphasise again that the movement from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith has caused so much critical analysis, dissent and debate within the historic churches.

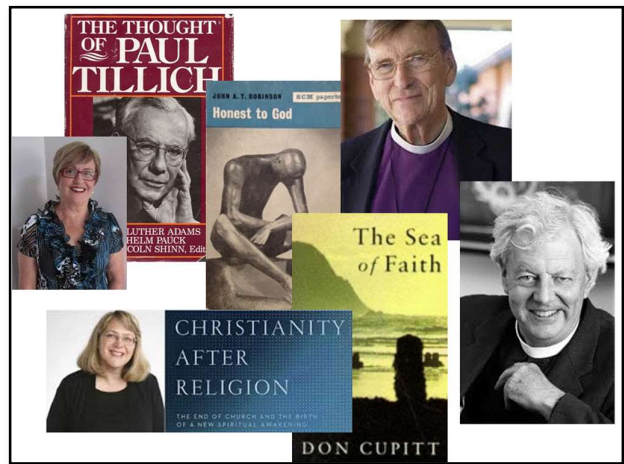
from Jesus of History

- Charismatic Jewish teacher, influenced by the Baptist
- striving for God's impending Kingdom to come
- Wholly theocentric preaching of the God of the Torah
- showed immense compassion, a bias to the poor and the unloved,
- Called disciples to his movement
- Confronted the Jerusalem Temple authorities
- Was executed

.....to Christ of Faith

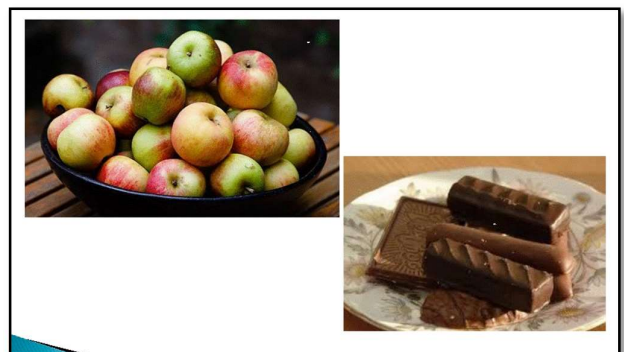
- preexisting Son of God sent by the Father as the Word incarnate,
- born of the Virgin Mary,
- a God Man who performed miracles, including nature miracles
- His death on the Cross was God's way of restoring fallen humanity through Jesus' own atonement for our sins
- through the power of God was raised from earthly death and exalted to God in heaven.
- Jesus will return from heaven to finally judge humankind at the general resurrection.

In our lifetime we have seen how significant voices have sprung from this theological and biblical scrutiny. Bishop Jack Spong has done so much to challenge the enforcing doctrines of the Church. Jack took his cue of course from Tillich and Bishop John Robinson, whose little book, *Honest to God*, created such a storm in the 1960's. Then through the 70s and 80's in the UK, the debate continued with the publication of essays under the title *The Myth of God Incarnate* and Bishop David Jenkins of Durham lit up interest in God through his provocative scholarship. At the same time the Sea of Faith movement, initiated through the BBC series of that title headed up by Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest and Cambridge Don, gave an impetus to the understanding of religion as a social construct and a place, even in the churches, for those who upheld the humanitarian ethics of Jesus but dispelled notions of a theistic Being.



I hope it is fair to say that in the last twenty years or so, writers and speakers beloved of a progressive understanding of Christianity – Marcus Borg, Dom Crossan, Val and Diana, here this weekend, Brian McLaren, Robin Meyers – and many others – are all singing from this same hymn sheet, inherited from this scholastic foundation of study of the historical Jesus and its implications. We have largely given up on the God up there, watching our every move and writing down in our Book of Life the ticks and the crosses earned in preparation for our judgement day. We read the Bible not as the unerring literal word of a God out there who demands our loyalty to a set of propositions. I am taking all of this theology for granted in this conference context.

Which brings me to the Church and how it has and needs to respond to the challenges of progressive Christianity. But before we embark on this third section let me share one story with you about the deus ex machina.



In a village church primary school in north Yorkshire where I used to work the cook in charge of the school lunch had laid out the dinner on the serving hatch and had put a basket of chocolate

biscuits at the end of the counter for the sweet. A local farmer that day dropped off a bag of rosy apples from his abundant harvest as a gift to the school. The cook put a notice on the bowl of apples, which read, "Take just one apple- God is watching you". A wise kid just before the lunch break noticed this and put another note on the chocolate biscuits, which read, "Take as many of these as you want, God is busy watching the apples".

So do our churches still believe in a God who watches the apples?

Church

You gather from the beginning of this session that I owe a great deal to the Church of England. It has employed me for 37 years, paid me, housed me and given me a modest but livable-upon pension. More importantly it has given me some fine and loving communities in which I and my family have grown up. For twenty years at St Mark's Church in Sheffield we shared our lives in company with people from all over the world who saw the Church as place of community, of healing, of commitment to try to bring the kingdom of God on earth, to see in the story of Jesus a way of life which invoked a commitment to social justice, to greater equality, to care for the least valued members of society. We so often failed to live up to this high calling but we kept on trying.

Sadly, this experience of the Church is not by any means universal, either for its ministers or its congregations. Too often you and I will have met with individuals damaged by those churches whose understanding of the scriptures and the teachings of their church have led to exclusion and deep and painful hurt. We know how the Church over the centuries has so often sided with the powerful, has failed the poor, failed women, failed gay and lesbian people, failed divorcees, and the list could go on. It is a picture of glory and of shame, the church as friend and as foe.

The game, fortunately or unfortunately can be reapplied to the church – please offer a positive

statement on the church, and then a negative one, and let's see what your general feelings are – consider gender balance.

In the UK the parish churches are there still in every village, town and city in our small land mass, populated by about 65 million people. Oh there are fewer churches overall, especially in the Free church denominations, but nevertheless the churches still do good works, offering a sense of community in an increasingly individualistic world. In many a small English village today there will be no pub, no post office, no corner shop and so the church often is seen as one of the few places which can draw together. It is generally members of our churches who are the first to volunteer to run foodbanks for poor people, to press government for a greater compassion for migrants



and asylum seekers. Through its establishment position, the Church of England bishops in our parliament often use their place in the hierarchy to work for a more just and peaceful world.

And yet the churches in the UK as in most of northern Europe face catastrophic decline in membership and attendance on Sundays. Those of us here who are old enough, say to have grandchildren, can recall how in the 1950s and 1960s churches were relatively flourishing. There were the church processions, the baptisms, weddings and funerals. It was not odd to go to church on Sunday, it was the right thing to do, as it is in many parts of the world today.

Change in the air.....

- Relaxation of Sunday trading
- More leisure opportunities
- More transport facilities, rise of car ownership
- Social conventions shifting
- Less deference to authority

- Ecumenical movement
- Changes in liturgy, new services, new Bible translations
- Evangelical response eg Decade of Evangelism

But decline was happening in Europe. Alan Wilkinson argues from the WW1 onwards faith in the Christian story and therefore in church began to be questioned and this accelerated in the 1960's. Change was in the air in the church just as it was in society at large after the Great War. The causes are manifold, social - liberalisation of trading, changing work patterns, the rise of social opportunities, Sunday felt different. In response the churches began to talk to each other more seriously, the ecumenical movement began to flourish, there were alternative services, there were new translations of the Bible, new song books.

And yet, decline continued.

Change or Decay in the UK ?

- 80% of children under 15 now no longer attend church

- Churches in the UK 2005 – 2010

• Anglican	Opening 34	Closing 238
• Methodists	Opening 5	Closing 337
• Pentecostalist	Opening 668	Closing 4

C of E itself forecasts that if present trends continue, weekly attendances will have fallen by 90% by 2057

Situation today – various polls point to the fact that the UK is one of the least religious countries in Europe in terms of church attendance. C of E itself forecast that if present trends continue weekly attendances will have fallen by 90% by 2057.

And so today in my own church there are Reform and Renewal initiatives, concentrating on clergy training, on policies for growth, a determination to hang on to church schools, ideas like Messy

church, café church, Fresh Expressions. Much of this is both understandable and to be commended as a serious attempt to shore up your organisation, who wouldn't do this?

But what I think is needed today is a much more radical challenge to the churches, to be honest about the implications of scholarship, a willingness to look at the whole superstructure of those enforcing beliefs and doctrines and begin at least to reset the church's priorities towards the humanitarian ethics of Jesus and away from the cosmic Christ of faith, to recognise that people are searching for meaning and a connectedness to a sense of the spiritual beyond the conventions of belief.

Dreaming of a better world?



What do I mean by a radical change? The word itself is clear in meaning trying to get to the roots of something and for me that means trying to get under the skin of this Jesus of Nazareth, to connect with the kind of sacred experience which filled his life, his presence, his teaching.



Was Jesus a radical?

- seeking a return to the roots of a Jewish faith in the generous God of the Torah
- proclaiming an alternative kingdom to the dominant Empire of his day
- the calling and equipping of chosen disciples, dedicated to the cause of building a counter-culture of love and beneficence
- sought to break down barriers of class, age and gender
- Seeking first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, being prepared to be the servant of others, affirming the Upside-Downness of Jubilee

Radicals are people unafraid to press hard for change, to fight their corner and dream their dreams. Was Jesus himself a radical? This set of factors might persuade you that he was:

- seeking a return to the roots of a Jewish faith in the generous God of the Torah
- proclaiming an alternative kingdom to the dominant Empire of his day
- the calling and equipping of chosen disciples, dedicated to the cause of building a counter-culture of love and beneficence
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As far as our Sunday worship is concerned, as far as we present to the world how we conceive of God, of Spirit, of the sacred through our present liturgies and occasional offices, it is there that we need a spirit of rebellion, a total rethink of the kind of God we believe in. I believe the church needs to be shaped fundamentally by the human Jesus, by the Man for Others, by his teachings and example. This is what Don Cupitt calls Kingdom Religion:

- Religious immediacy
- More democratic
- More personal
- Less about doctrine, more about journeying
- Liberation, feminist, black, inclusive, theologies validated

This means the church being passionate about the things Jesus was passionate about in this world. (You'll recognise Marcus Borg's influence here). And so these for me would be marks of being a passionate Church. Not a church which is primarily concerned about THE Passion of Jesus.....

- Passionate about the right things
 - Justice, Compassion, Love and healing

- Prophetic and Inclusive
- Holy, mediates the sacred
- Blesses all life
- Offers a journey of discovery and questioning

So whether we consider ourselves to be radical or revisionist it seems to me that there are three vital ingredients needed— honesty, the ability to reimagine the Christian faith and being passionate about the right things.

Mark Oakley, a canon of St Paul's cathedral wrote in a recent article that he wanted St Paul's to be 'less a fortress of faith and more a resource for the soul'

So is it possible to have communities dedicated to being shaped by the life of Jesus, churches doing good works in their communities, churches fighting for justice, working for peace, trying to save the planet environmentally? Is it possible to have churches which are places of enquiry, prepared to live with the big questions of life, seeking meaning, honouring doubt and finding friends with all who seek to bring God's kingdom on earth?

Well clearly it is possible because such churches already exist. It is possible for churches to change because some already have changed.

The way we achieve change maybe more by revision than revolution. We need to be positive in our endeavour. Too often organisations which challenge the status quo are depicted as being nihilistic, offering nothing positive, being critical but not constructive. Sometimes liberally minded folk themselves get frustrated by the seeming lack of a coordinated efforts by various liberal groups to work together for a common cause. I get this. We need to offer an alternative vision of a church which does seek to put the humanitarian ethics of Jesus, the kingdom gospel to the fore and yet also keeps open the rumour of God, as it were.

So I end being an optimist and hoping that the work of organisations like PCN Britain and the Common Dreams Network can contribute to a much bigger debate about whether or not a

radical church is possible. And my final quote is from John Robinson's *Honest to God*.

'The true radical is the man who continually subjects the Church to the judgement of the Kingdom, to the claims of God in the increasingly non-religious world which the Church exists to serve.'

Adrian Alker, Chair, PCN Britain