

“Ecclesiastical Cannibalism” and the Imperative for Unity: Critical Reflections on Newbigin’s Theology and Pentecostal Church Planting in New Zealand

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Abstract

Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) developed a theology of church unity that remains relevant for the twenty-first century Pentecostal church. First, in this paper, a sketch of Newbigin’s theology of church unity is offered, focusing on his interpretation of John 17:20-23. Central to his theology is that church unity is for mission. Second, I will critically reflect on my own observations as a church pastor of a questionable church-planting practise, arguably not unknown in Pentecostal contexts. Such practises, I will argue, amount to “ecclesiastical cannibalism,” and undermine the church’s mission. Third, Pentecostal hesitancy toward church unity is examined, and possible reasons for it are offered and critiqued. It is suggested that cultural compromise with consumerism, as expressed in the crude growth metrics of “bums, bucks, and buildings,” is a cause of ecclesiastical cannibalism. This article aims to unmask unfaithfulness to Christ, promote the church’s pure devotion to Christ, and contribute to the nascent upsurge in church unity amongst Pentecostals. Several constructive steps for ecclesial praxis are proposed for the sake of the church’s mission.

Introduction

In this article the theology of Lesslie Newbigin is related to Pentecostal church leadership experience in New Zealand. Newbigin’s lifelong dedication to the *missio ekklesia* included, necessarily so from his perspective, his ecumenical commitments. Indeed, he saw them as two sides of the same coin. Jesus spoke, in John 12:32, about drawing all people to himself. Mission and unity, for Newbigin, are two descriptions of the risen Lord’s same drawing action. The difference lies in the location, world or church, of those being drawn. Newbigin explains: “The obligation to take the Gospel to the whole world, and the obligation to draw all Christ’s people together, both rest upon Christ’s whole work and are indissolubly connected. Every attempt to separate these tasks violates the wholeness of Christ’s ministry to the world.”¹ As a New Zealand Pentecostal pastor for over a decade, I routinely observed amongst Pentecostal Pastors a high commitment to Christ’s mission that was rarely matched

¹ Newbigin, “The Missionary Dimension,” 208.

by the conviction that “Children of one Father should live together as one family.”² What, for Newbigin, God had joined together, had in New Zealand Pentecostalism undergone a separation. Relegating the impulse for church unity was both by omission and commission. This is problematic, for if Newbigin is right, this harms the church’s mission, a mission that Pentecostals are typically so committed to. The practical problems to be addressed have both theological and practical causes: both will be discussed.

In this article the imperative for unity in Newbigin’s ecclesiology will first be outlined. Second, I will critically reflect on my own observations as a church pastor of common church-planting practises that conflict with Newbigin’s theology of church unity. Here I will attempt to trace the underlying factors that have led to a neglect of church unity amongst some Pentecostal pastors. The reflections offered come from New Zealand but are intended to relate to Pentecostalism more broadly. Finally, I will offer some constructive suggestions for ecclesial praxis. It is hoped that this article will enhance the church’s mission by contributing to the nascent upsurge in a theology of church unity amongst Pentecostals, unmask unfaithfulness to Christ that has been cloaked in the language of church metrics, and offer a more robust and faithful alternative.

While I am an ordained Pentecostal minister with Elim New Zealand, the opinions expressed are my own.

1. Newbigin’s Theology of Church Unity

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary statesman, ecumenical leader, and was a founding Bishop of the Church of South India, a church reunion³ comprised of formerly Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist churches. Newbigin narrates,

In a South Indian village a visit from the bishop is quite a public occasion. He is met at a convenient spot two or three hundred yards from the edge of the village by an official deputation of the elders of the church. There are garlands of flowers, trays of fruit, and other tokens of greeting. There will be a band and a choir, or possibly two choirs singing different lyrics at the same time. Just in case there should be any moments of silence, there will also be fireworks. [This gathers the whole village together.]

...And so it has often happened that I have found myself standing on the steps of a village church, opening the Scriptures to preach the Gospel to a great circle of Hindus and Moslems standing round, while the Christian congregation sits in the middle. When I do that, I always know one thing: the words which I speak will only carry weight if those who hear them can see that they are being proved true in the life of the congregation which sits in the middle. When I hold up Christ as the Saviour of all people, and repeat his promise, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people unto myself,” I know that my hearers are only likely to

² Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 234.

³ Reunion is Newbigin’s preferred term for movements that seek to restore “the unity which has been broken.” He says “The task of reunion involves primarily this return to Christ to seek His judgment upon ourselves and all that we are, to give ourselves afresh to Him in penitence and faith as we face again and again the pain and tension of our differences from one another.” Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, 105.

believe this promise if they can see in fact that the Saviour of the world is drawing people of all sorts [all cliques, castes, and parties] into one family. ...If, on the other hand, they see only a series of rival groups competing with one another for influence and membership, they are not likely to be impressed by the message of our Saviour.⁴

The unity of the Church, for Newbigin, directly impacts upon the Church's missionary effectiveness. Destructive church rivalry and competition contradict the gospel of reconciliation. Therefore, "...disunity of the Church is a contradiction of its proper nature and a public abdication of its right to preach the gospel to all nations."⁵ I have found that sentence is worth returning to frequently.

The heart of Newbigin's theology of church unity is his interpretation of Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17:

^{11b} Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one... ²⁰ I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17)

Newbigin says four things are clear from Jesus' prayer. First, the unity of Christians is grounded upon their communal participation in Christ by the Spirit. This spiritual unity deriving from a mutual participation in the being of the triune God. "As God is one, so those who bear his name and the impress of his character must necessarily be one."⁶ Christian unity is *first* "from above" and not "from below." Newbigin says, "[The Church] derives its character not from its membership but from its Head, not from those who join it but from Him who calls it into being. It is God's gathering."⁷ Unity does not come from human graft, it is God's gift. The unity is not organisational or by agreement in doctrine but simply arises out of Christ's indwelling in His people and their being in him. Of course, there is a basic agreement upon doctrine which is essential to unity, "But the unity in question is not in essence an intellectual agreement about doctrine: it is a total mutual reconciliation which is the result of being born anew by the Spirit. It is a unity of mutual love given by God."⁸ Practically, therefore, Milne comments that amongst churches with substantial doctrinal unity two actions are unthinkable: pursuing mission (i) apart from other churches, (ii) in competition with other churches.⁹

⁴ Newbigin, "Unity and Mission," pages not numbered. Language updated to be gender inclusive.

⁵ Newbigin, *A Faith*, 81.

⁶ Newbigin, "The Nature of the Unity," 182.

⁷ Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 27-28.

⁸ Newbigin, "The Nature of the Unity," 185.

⁹ Milne, *John*, 249.

Second, and perhaps the most contested, “the unity we seek is a visible unity – visible to the world, a sign by which the world may be brought to faith in Christ...”¹⁰ Whitacre comments that the church displaying their union with God in their corporate unity is a central part of “the missionary strategy of this Gospel”.¹¹ Kanagaraj testifies that when Christians in India were severely persecuted in the early twenty-first century, the unity of the churches was important. Together they condemned the attacks, held united meetings and processions, appealed to the governing authorities to take immediate action, and prompted international intervention. He concludes “All these attempts became channels to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that the world may know who Jesus is. Persecution helped in some places the churches to grow rather than to subside.”¹² Rejecting gnostic dualistic tendencies, Church unity must be visible. Newbigin sees in John 17:21 the plain teaching that “It is this visible unity which will bring the world to believe”.¹³ The world cannot easily recognise divine action in a *spiritual* church unity that remains *invisible*.¹⁴

The church was united from its inception. However, Newbigin’s theology of church unity is not idealistic. He acknowledges that in the New Testament “This visible unity was certainly subject to stresses. It was not a perfect spiritual unity. But it is surely impossible to deny that it belongs to the nature of the Church as willed by our Lord that this visible unity should not be broken...”¹⁵ In John 17 Jesus gave the church its marching orders for unity.

Third, Jesus prayed “they may all be one... so that the world may believe...” Church unity is an authenticating and indicative sign that God is at work. Bloesch states it bluntly: “We need unity for the sake of mission...”¹⁶ For Newbigin mission and unity form an inextricable whole. Jesus desires to draw all people, from inside and outside of the church, to himself (John 12:32). This entails mission to those outside of the Church and efforts towards Church unity for those within it. Newbigin’s commitment to the ecumenical movement was an expression of his mission-mindedness. “Mission and unity are two sides of the same reality,” Newbigin explains, “or rather two ways of describing the same action of the living Lord who wills that all should be drawn to Himself.”¹⁷

Fourth, the unity that Jesus prayed for is eschatologically-oriented and thus is in process. As “Jesus looks toward the end of all things,” he prays for “all who should believe.”¹⁸ Jesus prayed for Christians to “grow into this unity until they are made ‘perfectly one’.”¹⁹ At this

¹⁰ Newbigin, “The Nature of the Unity We Seek, 186.

¹¹ Whitacre, *John*. Cf Kanagaraj, *John*, 169.

¹² Kanagaraj, *John*, 171.

¹³ Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 235.

¹⁴ Newbigin’s interpretation has exegetical support. See Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 335; Milne, *The Message of John*, 248; Whitacre, *John*.

¹⁵ Newbigin, “The Nature of the Unity We Seek,” 187.

¹⁶ Bloesch, *The Church*, 262.

¹⁷ Newbigin, “The Missionary Dimension,” 208-9.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 235.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 234.

point, a brief digression to the apostle Paul's eschatologically-oriented ecclesiology will prove helpful.

² I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³ But I am afraid that... your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Corinthians 11)

Paul explains that the church is betrothed to Christ: the relationship has begun and will be fulfilled in the parousia. "In the meantime," says Collins, "Paul feels obliged to protect the purity of the church. He is jealous lest anyone interfere with the integrity of the Corinthian church's relationship with Christ."²⁰ Paul's concern is the church's pure devotion is being corrupted by a false gospel (verse four). Pure devotion to Christ embraces his person and teaching, which includes Jesus' prayer for church unity. Compromising over commitment to church unity may also signal compromising purity of devotion to Christ and thereby captivity to a false gospel. We will return to this shortly.

Having outlined Newbigin's theology of church unity we now switch gears. What follows are some reflections of a Pentecostal Pastor in relation to church unity.

2. Critical Reflections of a Pastor

As a Pastor in Dunedin I was active in the ministers fraternal that led the Combined Dunedin Churches. Participating in that godly group was a joy. A spirit of unity was expressed through annual combined services, joint missionary outreach, a writing team for the *Otago Daily Times* national newspaper, combined leadership training, monthly prayer and fellowship amongst the leaders, combined youth gatherings, pulpit swaps, and joint responses to crises such as the Christchurch mosque shootings. Interdenominational unity lived out "on the ground" is precious indeed (cf. Psalm 133). However, some of my pastoral observations are directly opposite to this spirit of unity.

To qualify what follows, church planting is an urgent and important task and I pray for God to raise up more church planters. For missionally-responsible denominations (and congregations), church planting is a necessity. As a Westerner, I cannot envisage how else the West will be re-evangelised. Personally, I see the work of church planting as heroic, being both courageous and costly. Nonetheless, not all church planting practices are healthy.

Locally or nationally, I have observed churches being planted, from at least four different Pentecostal denominations or movements.²¹ While church planting practises varied, most included launching something akin to interest-gatherings months before the church officially launched. By the time of launch Sunday between 100 to 300 people would attend—the

²⁰ Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 214.

²¹ What follows is reflection on, and critical analysis of, my limited observations of New Zealand Pentecostalism. Other important areas for discussion vis-à-vis church unity that cannot be pursued here include church practise: in other denominations in New Zealand, in the churches in Australia, and relations between Maori and Pakeha Christians in New Zealand and European and first nation Australian Christians.

nucleus of the new church, and God would be praised for the advance of His kingdom. However, these interest-gatherings were primarily marketed to Christians, most of whom already belonged to local churches. No doubt unattached Christians, the disaffected, and non-Christians would also be attracted, but the majority came from existing churches. To the extent that Christians from existing churches were the centre of the church planting strategy, surely this amounts to 'ecclesiastical cannibalism'—not the productive utilising of spare parts lying around, but the deliberate partial assimilation of one church by another. This approach seems to leverage religious consumerism. Turner suggests that consumerism has impacted ecclesial missional practice.

In a competitive market, religious denominations are forced to sell their services and hence have adopted many of the practices of the secular marketplace, with the use of focus groups, commercial advertising, branding, and promotional campaigns to win new customers and maintain customer loyalty.²²

Turner's description is apt, raising questions of cultural compromise with consumerism.

Permit me to briefly resort to the Pentecostal language of testimony. In one instance of church planting I observed, over approximately one year an existing church went from having twenty university student small groups to five, and in that time the new church plant developed fifteen university student small groups. The new church plant was hailed a success, its numerical increase taken as evidence that God was working. However, the net increase of Christ-followers in that city was negligible or non-existent. Newbigin cautions that if any sign of vitality is simply accepted as evidence that God is at work, this will lead to "the deification of success," which he calls "sheer paganism."²³ Careful pneumatological discernment is required that is based on metrics more detailed than numbers alone. Newbigin observes: "the name of the Spirit may be invoked to justify attitudes and practices which destroy the unity of the body. Mere vitality is not necessarily the mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Everything which grows vigorously is not thereby proved to be of God."²⁴ Elsewhere Newbigin describes the Capitalistic ideology of growth for the sake of growth as cancerous.²⁵

In the face of declining church numbers in the West and an increasingly aggressive secularism, this "ecclesiastical cannibalism" to some extent resembles rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. To reiterate, it is not incidental transfer "growth" that is in view, but the making of Christians from other churches the centre of church-planting strategy. Such naivety and futility, I submit, might be the consequence of being captivated by a false and syncretistic gospel: "success" solely understood quantitatively. Craig Keener comments that the apostle Paul is a father figure who has arranged for his children's betrothal to Christ. "Paul is concerned lest they be spiritually corrupted into unfaithfulness to *the true Christ*..."²⁶

²² Turner, "Post-Secular Society," 142, emphasis removed.

²³ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 26.

²⁴ Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 80.

²⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 114.

²⁶ Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 225, emphasis added.

The true Christ prayed for his church to be one so that the world will believe. If my observations have any validity, then certainly pure devotion to Christ's prayer for his church has been compromised, at least partially. The good news for all the world has been employed by the consumeristically-driven competition for numbers. Admittedly, the competitive religious market has had at least one positive effect: the effective use of marketing techniques which results in a broader dissemination of the Christian message.²⁷ Nonetheless, the power of these same marketing techniques can corrupt, degenerating the church into, at its worst, a feeding frenzy of competing rivals. However, the church of Jesus Christ is not a fast-food outlet but humanity remade in Christ. The future-oriented church is to prepare for the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). When Jesus returns, He "is coming back... for a bride not a harem."²⁸ Having started our turn towards theological critique of these observations, we turn completely in that direction.

3. Theological Critique of Ecclesiastical Cannibalism

Some caveats are important before we proceed. Pastors know that *not* all "transfer growth" is negative. With church plants some transfer growth is both unavoidable and, arguably, unproblematic. In carrying out the Great Commission, no one "patch" belongs to a specific church, especially in densely-populated urban environments.²⁹ The labourer does not lament that God has sent more workers, in the form of a new church plant, to reap the harvest (cf. Matt. 9:38).³⁰ Additionally, some "competition" can be construed as healthy,³¹ although an *attitude* of competition—especially for existing Christians, seems antithetical to Jesus' prayer in John 17. While acknowledging these qualifications, it is deeply problematic to make Christians from other churches central to church planting strategy, for several reasons.

First, there is no net growth to God's kingdom. Thus, all numerical growth issuing from this is illusory. It succumbs to a parochial perspective to ministry rather than viewing all church ministry as Holy Spirit-enabled participation in the ministry of the risen Christ: it properly speaking is his ministry and not ours.

Second, it seems to embrace the cultural and demonic principalities of individualism and consumerism rather wrestle against them. If our ecclesiastical practises have been syncretistically compromised by paganism then we are in situation of cultural compromise; confession, deep repentance, and prayer are needed.

²⁷ Usunier, "9591", 43.

²⁸ An unnamed preacher quoted by Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 102. Tragically, Robeck reflects that Pentecostalism "has managed, in less than a century, to contribute to nearly as many different divisions as it took the rest of the church a millennium to produce." Robeck, "Pentecostals and Ecumenism", 340-1.

²⁹ The context of much of Newbigin's reflection on church unity is rural south India. There, he spoke of one church per village surrounded by a Hindu and Muslim majority, something extremely different to a modern city. Exploring how church unity might be outworked in different population densities is beyond the scope of this article.

³⁰ Thank you to Pastor Then Hon Chew for this insight.

³¹ In personal conversation, one Senior Pastor told me he found that such competition forced him to clarify, in prayer and in practice, what exactly God had called his church to be and to do.

Third, encouraging consumerism inhibits Christian spiritual maturation by encouraging *incurvatus in se*. Stolz and Usunier state "In consumer society, individuals learn that products and services should be attuned to their every need."³² This attitude is naturally and effortlessly transferred to the church. The consumeristic impulse to select the superior option for religious consumption is typically based on a self-centred self-gratifying outlook, stimulating the turn inward. In contrast, Christian maturation resembles, at its most basic, growth in love for God and neighbour, both of which is outward and other focused. The compass of consumerism points in the opposite direction.

Fourth, the unity of the church is actively harmed if competition for professing Christians becomes the default *modus operandi*. For Pentecostals this is not new. Citing examples from Australian Pentecostal history, Clifton notes how competition has, historically, degenerated into "outright intolerance and open warfare."³³ Since visible unity is so that the world will believe, this debacle undermines the church's missionary effectiveness.

Milne says the church's visible unity should, amongst congregation members, be "a persuasive reflection of the *mutually supportive, utterly loyal and eternally accepting* love of the Father and the Son."³⁴ Extending this to relationships between congregations highlights that some popular church planting practises are *unsupportive* and encourage both *disloyalty* and consumeristic *rejection* of one church whanau³⁵ for another.

Fifth, the pain caused is actively injurious and detrimental to faithful servants of Christ and church communities. Reflect briefly on the unity of God's people in the Old Testament. Biblically, the unity of God's people relates to their highest calling, holiness. David Stubbs, in his commentary on *Numbers*, observes "the moral vision of Israel... considers the interpersonal relationships between the Israelites as part of the holiness of God's people. Tears or schisms in those relationships desecrates the holiness of the people and is an offense against God."³⁶ Newbigin reminds us that this is also true of the church, for "Holiness and unity are... not alternative options for the church."³⁷ Thus, ecclesiastical cannibalism is severely injurious to the holiness of the church. Constructing a new building using bricks from existing buildings harms the structural integrity of the latter, and painfully ruptures covenant relationships between these living stones. To the extent that relationships are partly constitutive of human personhood,³⁸ and interpersonal relationships are weakened by encouraging people to change church communities, as they surely are, these practises inflict personal harm as well as communal and reputational injury.

³² Stolz and Usunier, "Religions as Brands", 8.

³³ Clifton, "Ecumenism", 550-1.

³⁴ Milne, *The Message of John*, 248, emphasis added.

³⁵ Maori term for extended family.

³⁶ Stubbs, *Numbers*, 59.

³⁷ Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 230.

³⁸ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 39.

Eugene Peterson once spoke disapprovingly of “ecclesiastical pornography”—lusting after the fantasy of a bigger and healthier church.³⁹ Might it be ecclesiastical pornography and the idolatry of success that drives ecclesiastical cannibalism?

4. Pentecostal Hesitancy toward Church Unity⁴⁰

If my leadership reflections have some validity, why does ecclesiastical cannibalism exist? Two reasons are apparent. First, the glaring omission of a theology of unity, hence the rationale for this article. The sin of commission is caused by the sin of omission. To some extent among Pentecostal Pastors, pursuing church unity has been overlooked. In my experience this is because a theology of church unity is a gap in our theological formation. It is curious that in our time many mission-minded Pentecostal pastors and churches perceive pursuing church unity to be a low priority.⁴¹ Sadly, my observations are corroborated by scholars in other countries, such as South Africa⁴² and Australia. Australian Pentecostal leader Jacqueline Grey observes that Pentecostal Pastors do not tend to prioritise pursuing unity in the midst of their busy schedules, although this is starting to change.⁴³ This is important since “as leadership goes, so goes the church.”⁴⁴

This omission of pursuing unity is contrary to our Pentecostal heritage. For example, in William Seymour’s first influential paper, *The Apostolic Faith*, he stated what the movement stood for: “Christian unity everywhere” was listed alongside “revivals, missions, street and prison work.”⁴⁵ Robeck shows there was early ecumenical optimism amongst Pentecostals.⁴⁶ Hollenweger is stronger, observing that “the Pentecostal Movement started as an ecumenical revival movement within the traditional churches.”⁴⁷

Amongst Pentecostal Pastors an awareness of the importance of church unity is increasing, as Grey noted. Vondey helpfully surveys the visible upturn in Pentecostal participation in ecumenism in recent decades.⁴⁸ Amos Yong is concerned, however, that even where commitment to unity is a priority, Pentecostals sometimes prefer to speak of spiritual and not visible unity. Why do Pentecostals so often resist visible unity? Yong theorises the following motivations: *individualism*, which has been expressed in organisational

³⁹ Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 22-23.

⁴⁰ As a global phenomenon Pentecostalism has counter examples to this. For welcome accounts of cooperation and unity amongst Pentecostals, see, for example, A. Hämäläinen & G. McClung eds., *Together in One Mission* eds., and G. Forbes, *A Church on Fire*.

⁴¹ Mapping movements and instances of church unity and co-operation in New Zealand is relevant but outside the scope of this paper.

⁴² Nel comments that in South Africa, “It is probably true to asserts that the majority of Pentecostal leaders at the level of local assemblies do not participate in any form of ecumenical involvement”. Thankfully, Nel qualifies this (overstated?) comment with numerous exceptions, including joint social action and ministerial fraternals. Nel, “Pentecostal ecumenical impulses”, 5.

⁴³ Grey, “John 17:21”.

⁴⁴ Robeck, Jr, “Pentecostals”, 75.

⁴⁵ Cited in Robeck, Jr, “Pentecostals”, 61-62.

⁴⁶ Robeck, Jr, “Pentecostals”, 61-62.

⁴⁷ Walter J. Hollenweger, “The Pentecostal Movement and the World Council of Churches”, *Ecumenical Review* 18:3 (1966), 313, cited in Robeck, Jr, “Pentecostals”, 76.

⁴⁸ Vondey, “Pentecostalism and Ecumenism”.

fragmentation; and *fear*, including fear that Pentecostals would lose their distinctive identity. After criticising both motives, Yong further questions why Pentecostals resist outward “visible signs of unity for the Church given their own insistence on the import of outward signs” in relation to Spirit baptism.⁴⁹ If Yong’s diagnosis of Pentecostal resistance or hesitancy toward church unity is correct, this is not only painful, but also unproductive. Since unity is for the sake of mission, neglecting church unity is, to speak in the ecclesiastical *lingua franca*, pragmatically mistaken. There were two churches that had been unreconciled for twenty years after an angry division. Commentator Roger Fredrikson, who pastored one of the churches, shares about the moment they held a public service of reconciliation. The next day some congregation members were stopped in the street by people saying they had heard the good news. Fredrikson comments, “The message we proclaimed had become... credible.”⁵⁰

A second reason for the phenomenon of ecclesiastical cannibalism is the use of easily measurable but crude growth metrics of “bums, bucks, and buildings” as the primary criteria for success. A preoccupation with numbers is in danger of succumbing to the idolatry of success, represented by the crowd, something quite contrary to Jesus’ own practice. Eugene Peterson observes, “Jesus... restricted nine tenths of His ministry to twelve Jews, because it was the only way to reach all Americans [or New Zealanders].”⁵¹ The twelve, not the crowd, were Jesus’ primary focus. Rather than focus on the crowd—“what were numbers like on Sunday?”—Coleman explains Jesus’ “concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with people whom the multitudes would follow.”⁵² Focusing on the crowd not only sets aside Jesus’ teaching and example, it is also ineffective in producing fully devoted followers of Christ, or mature disciples who make disciples. Writing almost sixty years ago, Coleman’s observation still cuts deep: “the costly principles of leadership development and reproduction [making disciples who make disciples] seem to have been submerged beneath the easier strategy of mass recruitment.”⁵³ To return to the pragmatic for a moment, is this strategy working? Is the proportion of committed and mature Christ-followers in any given city or nation increasing through this strategy? Dallas Willard suggests it is not, and rather provocatively offers the advice: “when all else fails, follow the instructions.”⁵⁴

Qualitative as well as quantitative metrics for “bearing fruit that lasts” must be employed. Generic metrics could be constructed for fruit-bearing both internal and external to the congregation. Indeed, this might be one of the more urgent tasks facing church denominations and movements. Research with seventy church leaders in South Australia in

⁴⁹ Yong, “Pentecostalism and Ecumenism: part 2”.

⁵⁰ Fredrikson, *John*, 259.

⁵¹ Peterson, *Travelling Light*, 182.

⁵² Coleman, *The Master Plan*, 27. Language updated to be inclusive.

⁵³ Coleman, *The Master Plan*, 104.

⁵⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), xv, cited in Dodds, *What is Church?*, 39. For a discussion of what this might mean, see Dodds, *What is Church?*, Chapter Seven.

2017 led to one such set of metrics, labelled a Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI), that can be used to assess personal spiritual growth. In sum, its ten categories are:

- 1) Passion for God.
- 2) Hunger to grow, teachability.
- 3) Knowing and teaching the Bible.
- 4) Christlike character.
- 5) Prayer life.
- 6) Holistic faith and life integration.
- 7) Participation in worship, witness, and service.
- 8) Living counterculturally in deed and word.
- 9) Generous towards others' needs.
- 10) Harmonious relationships.

Devenish has helpfully tabulated this SVI for practical application.⁵⁵ Beyond this SVI, possible external metrics include: community impact through action for justice, feeding the hungry, serving the poor, care for the marginalised, progress toward church unity, racial reconciliation, evangelistic outreach, the impact of creative ministries and educational programmes. A thorough exploration is beyond our present concerns, but the point is to attempt to define "fruit that will last" (John 15:16) in a more Christlike way. Congregations growing in such personal and external metrics would be missionally fruitful and more naturally resistant to hostile cultural-spiritual powers such as consumerism.

F. F. Bruce rightly observes that church unity is the result of the Holy Spirit's ministry.⁵⁶ Early Pentecostal impulses toward ecumenism were specifically attributed to the Spirit's work. An early Pentecostal said that her new experience of the Holy Spirit had given her "a sudden impulse of fellowship with all who name the name of Christ."⁵⁷ The theology of this paper suggests that the Spirit behind Pentecost, Azusa Street, and the ecumenical movement is the same Holy Spirit.⁵⁸ If true, then is a lack of commitment to church unity akin to resisting the Spirit, knowingly or unknowingly? It is curious that we Pentecostals who profess to cherish the Spirit's work have, in my view, a blind spot to his working. In New Zealand this was not always so. In the 1970s the APCNZ (Associated Pentecostal Churches of NZ) believed unity was essential for Pentecostal denominations to be missionally effective. We need the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit to blow again, to convict, lead, and give life where only the Spirit can.

Globally, the Pentecostal World Fellowship is an ongoing witness to the imperative for unity. Its signing a memorandum of understanding with the World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity

⁵⁵ Devenish, "Measuring Spiritual Formation", 222-3.

⁵⁶ Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 336.

⁵⁷ Amelia Yeomans, M.D. *Pentecostal Papers*, 25, cited in Robeck, Jr, "Pentecostal", 61.

⁵⁸ Of course: that is not to suggest, however, that everything that happens under these banners is Spirit-inspired, or to use the vernacular, kosher.

is a historic Pentecostal commitment to Christian unity.⁵⁹ Positively, Jacqueline Grey comments "We [Pentecostals] are a young movement and we are new to ecumenism, but I think we are learning fast."⁶⁰ Recently the managing editor of the *Asian Journal for Pentecostal Studies*, Dave Johnson, has observed a shift from ecumenical reluctance to engagement.⁶¹ Vondey is doubtless right that, due to the diverse, grassroots, non-institutional nature of global Pentecostalism, the picture of Pentecostal engagement with ecumenism is mixed. Continued reluctance and scepticism coexist with increased engagement and participation.⁶² Encouraging developments at a global level require local ownership, embodiment, and expression.

Karl Barth said "If we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, then the question of the unity of the Church will most surely become for us a burning question."⁶³ Speaking as a New Zealand Pentecostal pastor: Is this a burning question for New Zealand's Pentecostal churches?

5. Concluding Thoughts

More needs to be said about New Zealand's particular church history, about Newbigin's gospel critique of the church in our Western culture in relation to church unity, and about the theological rigor of popular church planting strategies. Here, I have related a sketch of Newbigin's theology of church unity with my own pastoral experience and observations within New Zealand Pentecostalism. Guarding the church's pure devotion to Christ includes being committed to praying and working toward the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer in John 17: that the church will be one so that the world will believe. Joining Christ in this prayer does not entail commitment to one particular model of church unity. Robeck observes that many models have been proposed but no one model has universal support.⁶⁴ My limited observations of New Zealand Pentecostal churches are that high devotion to Christ and his mission does not typically have an equivalent corresponding concern for church unity, especially evidenced by common church planting practices that I have termed ecclesiastical cannibalism. This incongruence, largely an ecclesiastical blind spot, at the very least weakens Christ's mission while seeking to advance it. It may also represent a dilution of pure devotion to Christ through the sullyng influence of harmful cultural-spiritual forces, especially consumerism. This appears to be a failure of spiritual discernment concerning the Spirit's leading, contrary to some of the earliest impulses of the Pentecostal movement. Guarding the church's pure devotion to Christ will also require the continual critical evaluation of the

⁵⁹ <https://www.pwfellowship.org/news/wcc-global-christian-forum-sign-memorandum-of-understanding-affirming-mutual-quest-for-christian-unity>, accessed 9 September 2022.

⁶⁰ Citing Mel Robeck. "Panel Discussion", timestamp 1hr 29 mins 30 seconds.

⁶¹ Johnson, "Pentecostals and Ecumenism", 1.

⁶² Vondey, "Pentecostalism and Ecumenism".

⁶³ Barth, *The Church*, 16.

⁶⁴ Robeck, "Ecumenism", 291.

relationship between gospel and ever-changing culture. To that end the work of The Gospel and Our Culture Network is to be commended.⁶⁵

Surely the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby was correct when, addressing the World Council of Churches in September 2022, he said “The luxurious expense of well-practised Christian division is no longer affordable.”⁶⁶ These remarks were not directed toward Pentecostals, but we Pentecostals are not excluded. Yong is equally strong, stating that should Pentecostals fail to commit to working towards church unity, “Pentecostals are guilty of continuing to perpetuate the scandal of Christian disunity before a world looking for the love of God.”⁶⁷

To the extent that my observations and analysis are accurate, it seems to me that several steps are needful. First, confession of past sins including being seduced away from pure devotion to Christ to the idol of “success.” Second, to the extent that harmful church planting strategies have been followed—practices of ecclesiastical cannibalism—confession and repentance are needed. (It should go without saying that church planting must be actively encouraged to reach those who do not know Christ.) Third, confession of and repentance from being lukewarm toward church unity. Fourth, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit in actively pursuing church unity locally and denominationally. Fifth, the development, promotion, and adoption of healthy church metrics for faithfulness and fruitfulness. This could be carried out by denominational bodies and/or educational institutions but would have to be locally adapted by each congregation according to their contextual calling. Sixth, continued critical missionary engagement with Western culture in its constant evolution (or devolution), both in theological study and ministerial training.⁶⁸ These six steps would constitute concrete preliminary steps toward the church being one so that the world will believe.

While this article primarily references Pentecostal churches in New Zealand, the issues raised may be relevant both in other countries and for non-Pentecostal churches in New Zealand and elsewhere.

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⁶⁵ See <https://gocn.org/>.

⁶⁶ Welby, “Archbishop of Canterbury”.

⁶⁷ Yong, “Pentecostalism and Ecumenism: part 2”. Another Pentecostal theological leader agrees, confessing: “From where I sit, Christ’s fractured Church, which includes the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, is not pleasing to God.” Johnson, “Pentecostals and Ecumenism”, 1.

⁶⁸ In New Zealand a good example of the latter is the new Laidlaw College course, taught by Dr Greg Liston and Dr Paul Windsor, called *Ngākau Maia: Christian Confidence*.

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