

# Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal



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## ARTICLES

- [A Call to Conversion: Ministry in Charles Taylor's \*Secular Society\*](#)  
PAUL WATSON 5
- [Entrepreneurial Leadership Development in the Christian Church  
in Scotland](#)  
RICHARD TIPLADY 24
- [Leadership Lessons from the First Year of a 'Missional' Church Plant](#)  
GORDON CHEUNG 44
- [The Cultural Liturgies of Café Church](#)  
JOSHUA COCKAYNE 59

## BOOK REVIEWS

- [WILLIAM AND JOANNA STORRAR, EDS. \*Last Doctor out of Biafra: The War Zone  
Journal of Dr Ann Jackson\*](#)  
Reviewed by DONALD URQUHART 75
- [WAYNE J. HANKEY AND DOUGLAS HEDLEY, EDS. \*Deconstructing Radical Theology:  
Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth\*](#)  
Reviewed by DAVID JASPER 78
- [BRUCE LOUDEN. \*Greek Myth and the Bible\*](#)  
Reviewed by NICHOLAS TAYLOR 79

### **A special request regarding the late Professor Donald M. MacKinnon**

Dr André Muller, who is working on an intellectual biography of Professor Donald M. MacKinnon (1913–94), would be very interested to hear from anyone who knew the Scottish philosophical theologian, or heard him lecture or preach, or corresponded with him, or has any information about him. Dr Muller may be contacted via email ([mulan398@gmail.co.nz](mailto:mulan398@gmail.co.nz)) or post (14a Arnot Ave, Clouston Park, Upper Hutt, 5018, New Zealand).

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# The Cultural Liturgies of Café Church

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This article seeks to examine the engagement between culture and mission in café churches.

As the examples considered in the article will demonstrate, the label 'café church' can refer to a variety of different church communities which differ significantly in both style and approach, but which typically try to borrow from aspects of 'café culture' to enable an accessible form of worship.<sup>1</sup>

This engagement between café culture and church raises a number of important questions for missiology and ecclesiology: Does the mix of contemporary culture and worship introduce values at odds with the values of the Gospel? Is worship compromised for the sake of mission and evangelism? These are particularly pertinent issues in the Scottish Episcopal Church in which, it is often said, the shared liturgy is the primary means of unification across the Province, rather than a particular set of doctrinal statements. Café churches often dispense with formal liturgy altogether, replacing these with more informal café-style liturgies. Thus, if café church is to be used in the SEC, then these issues need to be thought through with some care.

In the first section, I begin by profiling four different cafés or café churches: (1) A café church which meets in a 'third-place' (i.e. a non-church building) for Sunday worship, (2) A café church which runs a café throughout the week in a church building, and (3) A café church which worships in a church building with a café-style set-up for worship. Then, in the second section, I will discuss James K.A. Smith's recent work on cultural liturgies and examine the ways in which our understanding of liturgy might inform the interplay between culture and theology in café church. Drawing from Richard Niebuhr's discussion of culture in *Christ and Culture*, I consider how café church might be sensitive to the cultural issues which undermine

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<sup>1</sup> As Graham Cray puts it 'café church' is a label which attempts to 'group examples that seek to engage with café culture and whose external characteristic is a deliberate change of ambience and 'feel' when people meet corporately' (*Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* [Church House Publishing, 2009], p. 50).

the values of the Gospel, whilst at the same time using this contextual packaging to effectively communicate the Gospel.

### *Contextual Profiles*

In profiling the contexts below (drawn from interviews and my own observations), I aim to consider the engagement with mission and culture within these contexts and the ways in which the café church model allows for this engagement to occur.

#### *G2, York (Church of England)*

*Vicar: Revd Christian Selveratnam.* G2 is a large Fresh Expression church, planted from St. Michael le Belfry in York in 2006. G2 currently has two congregations – 'G2 Burnholme', which meets in a local community centre, and 'G2 City', which meets in a Methodist church hall in the city centre. Currently, both G2 congregations meet in theatre style, using the café style layout during student holidays when attendance is reduced. Both have around 100–150 in attendance on a Sunday.

G2 began as a café church aimed at creating an accessible worshipping community for the de-churched and un-churched, with a particular focus on young adults. It originally met in the function room of a gym, laying the room out with large tables and chairs. It puts a high value on pioneering and innovation; in its vision statement it describes that, 'We are committed to experimentation, starting new things, and sharing what we learn with others.' This also states that, 'We want to reimagine what the church can be in the world, models aren't sacred, and we believe Jesus can be worshipped with our whole lives.'<sup>2</sup>

Christian Selveratnam, the vicar at G2, describes 'café church' in relatively broad terms, noting that they have used a number of different models over the years. He describes that, 'the common ingredients' of café church, 'are a higher presence of hospitality, which often might be in the same rooms, the room where you worship and the room where you socialise, often are the same one'. He also notes that seating is often different, 'typically sitting on chairs that [are] organised around tables, rather than in something that resembles the layout of fixed pews or even theatre style or something like.' Thirdly, Selveratnam told me, the consequence of this difference in layout is that, 'the meeting naturally lends itself to...being a conversation, rather than a monologue'. Finally, he noted, café church often operates using the concept of the 'third space' (which I will explore later in the article); rather than meeting in places of work or home (first and second space), café churches often try to create a neutral space where people feel relaxed and

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<sup>2</sup> [G2York website](#), 2019 [accessed 14 June 2019].

can socialise easily. Selveratnam states that, 'I think café style, especially if it's not running [in] a church building takes the church meeting out of the church domain into somewhere neutral and that definitely helps people, particularly visitors.'

According to its website, one of G2's core values is evangelism, noting that 'We will keep inviting people to discover and follow Jesus and we will share, and be, good news in every sphere of influence', and part of its vision is '*to start and support churches that help people to discover and follow Jesus Christ. We are looking for opportunities to step out in mission, plant new churches and to support leaders in the region*'.<sup>3</sup> Selveratnam noted a number of features which mean that using a café-church model help and assist the community to be missional. First, one of the recurring themes was that of accessibility; the meeting was described as 'very easy to dip in and out of', something which has a parallel with a coffee shop. Selveratnam told me that, 'All sorts of different things are happening with different people and that doesn't matter. Because it's the style.' He suggested that this means that people feel comfortable to opt in and out of the meeting as they choose, making it a more accessible context for newcomers, and families with young children.

Secondly, Selveratnam noted that café church adopts a less top-down model than most traditional churches and allows people to express their own beliefs and opinions freely. He told me that this can be:

a very helpful mission or dynamic and it might be quite cultural, that people don't want to be told what beliefs are. But people, I think, are very interested in having a discussion about beliefs. ... as long as ... their interaction is genuinely wanted; I think people are happy to engage with that.

The use of discussion and interaction seems to foster this attitude, but even the layout suggests a more egalitarian approach to worship; the focus of the room is not the front, but the other members of the congregation. This is also reflected in the liturgy of the services; Selveratnam described the meetings as having a 'magazine style', having 'lots of little bits', breaking up talks with questions and media, and being creative with the use of interactive worship, discussion questions, and interviews.

Finally, Selveratnam mentioned the engagement with social justice in the community, noting the similarities with the 'pay it forward scheme' implemented in many cafes. He noted that many of his congregation are concerned with the ethics of the produce they consume, and the church's

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<sup>3</sup> G2York (emphasis in the original), *op. cit.*

engagement with people in need. The values of G2 in their vision state that: 'We will be radically generous with our resources – they're God's anyway – and go for costly obedience and a life of serving others, especially those most in need, locally and beyond.'<sup>4</sup> Selveratnam admitted that this may be a feature of the increased concern for social and ethical issues amongst millennials but reflected that the openness of their varied 'magazine-style' meetings allowed space for engagement with such issues.

One interesting point Selveratnam raised was the empowerment of lay leaders within this context. Because the services are varied in content, and because they strive to have an egalitarian structure, there are a number of lay people involved in leading, preaching, and leading worship. One result of this is that the church community is instinctively more in touch with culture; Selveratnam noted that, because clergy spend so much time engaged professionally in the Church, they can often lose touch with culture. He reflected that as a fifty-year-old ordained minister, he has a very different understanding of culture from a twenty-two-year-old student or young professional. Allowing a twenty-two-year-old to lead a service brings a difference in 'life perspective' and they are typically 'more likely to have the pulse of what's in popular culture'. Selveratnam suggested that their engagement with culture was therefore 'just a consequence of who's involved', noting that, 'the leader of the church [doesn't]... need to be monitoring ... popular culture on behalf of everyone. [They] need to empower people to bring all the things they're learning about following Christ through their life to the church context. And if we do that, well then what we're doing is ... of relevance to culture or ... seeing ... what Gospel themes are in society and trying to give them space in a meeting.'

Finally, Selveratnam admitted that café church can sometimes lack the richness of 'higher' forms of worship (e.g. cathedral worship), but that G2 aims to reach people who might not engage with cathedral worship easily. He also noted that the style of worship meant that it was much harder to remain anonymous than in larger, more formal settings. For people experiencing difficult times, for instance, the prospects of being 'sat at a table' when 'somebody asks you questions about your life' might feel uncomfortable.

*St George's Tron, Glasgow (Church of Scotland)*<sup>5</sup>

*Minister: Revd Alastair Duncan.* St George's Tron has a reputation within the evangelical church for teaching and preaching, and sits on Buchanan Street

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<sup>4</sup> G2York, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> See St George's Tron [website](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

in Glasgow city centre, one of the busiest streets in the UK. In 2013, shortly after a large refurbishment of the building, the congregation left over concerns with the Church of Scotland's stance on same-sex marriage. When Alastair Duncan arrived as Transition Minister, he had a congregation of 0, and a large refurbished city-centre building. Duncan spent some time considering the context which the church was part of, noting that the main communities surrounding the church were 'people who work in the city, people who shop in the city, students, night time leisure and pleasure seekers, and homeless and marginalised people'. Duncan told me that the key questions to consider during this process of discernment were: 'how do you get people to come in a building if they're not used to it? [And] How do you get young people to go in a church building?'. He noted that many un-churched people feel a sense of embarrassment and alienation going into a church building, but that everyone instinctively knows how to act in a café.

Thus, St George's decided to convert the back of the main sanctuary into a café, aiming to create a space with 'good ambiance' and providing 'good quality of food'. The café is open Monday to Friday, and serves soup, scones, coffee and cake. It runs as an independent charitable entity, giving its profits to two homeless charities in Glasgow, and it also provides free meals and drinks to homeless people in the city. They also run training placements for individuals struggling to find employment and employ a resident artist and filmmaker who, between them, paint and make video content for use in the building. They have a volunteer chaplain who aims to start conversations with individuals who come into the café, and to provide pastoral support for those in need.

St George's retained a traditional church layout in the rest of the building. On Sunday, the church meets in a 'café style', with a shared meal, beginning the meeting with discussion questions around tables, a time of testimony, sung worship and a sermon. The congregation sit around tables for the service, and when there is a communion service, the tables function as communion tables. Sunday afternoon operates as a community building social time, before a very short, simple evening service at 5pm.

Since opening the café, Duncan approximated that they had served at least 42,000 individuals over the course of a year, meaning that a lot of people pass through the building each day. A steady trickle of individuals had also joined the café church since the space was changed because of their interactions in the café. There is a weekly midweek service running in the church whilst the cafe is open, and the space is used for Alpha courses which are advertised in the café.

Yet, Duncan was under no illusions that the church was missional *because* it had a café in the building. He noted that in fact, having a café can sometimes 'become an excuse for people not thinking about mission', since



they assume that getting people in the building is all that mission requires. However, he admitted that part of his vision for the church was to change attitudes; some people might come in for coffee and cake and leave thinking that the church is not always 'a complete, historical anachronism, a waste of space'. Others might come and see a different approach to worship and mission and take it back to their own context. For this reason, Duncan told me, it is very hard to measure the extent of their missional engagement with the community.

Duncan noted that in engaging with aspects of café culture, they had sought to 'espouse ... the immanence of God, which is why we emphasise ... eating, drinking [and] culture, it's contemporary, it's relational'. He contrasted this approach with the engagement with culture found in cathedrals which often seek to emphasise God's transcendence. Duncan told me that this relational approach allowed for a very individualised community in which the marginalised individuals of the city-centre could be engaged with more easily. St George's has tried to borrow from café culture's emphasis on hospitality, and social justice, whilst still upholding the evangelical emphasis on preaching and teaching. It is interesting to see these values directly reflected in the architecture and layout of the building; whilst the café seeks to be comfortable, contemporary and cosy, the church still *feels* like a church building.

Duncan also seemed very keen to stress that not all aspects of café culture were reflected or replicated in their community. He stated that,

we recognise that the city centre is an environment which has given over to the gods of the age, given over to making money and spending money, we're a part of what's called the Glasgow 'Style Mile'; ... the gods of working human achievement of ... vanity and praise and appearance of ... leisure and pleasure and self-indulgence, and so on. So we're parked in amongst all of that. ... we engage with it, ... in the sense that, yes, we have a coffee shop, which invites people to come in ... [aiming to foster] the values of welcome hospitality, compassion ... But we are doing it explicitly as a church and in Jesus's name.

If there is an engagement with culture in the café church at St George's Tron, it is because there is a recognition that many of the values of café culture are Christian values. Yet, they are keen to stress that they are unlike any café since their work is done 'in Jesus's name'. As Duncan described their vision: 'what we seek to do, is to make the space as much a passive sign of the gospel as of Christian values, and, as an active space and terms of our practice, how we treat people how we welcome people.'

Duncan noted some challenges which come with café church; one of the results of engaging with a city centre context is that the congregation is more 'fluid'. This means that retaining volunteers is more challenging. Having a younger demographic also means that there is a lack of generous retired congregation members who typically volunteer in more traditional contexts. This also means that 'there's more of an emphasis ... on paying people to do stuff'. Additionally, because of the fluidity of the congregation, it can be difficult keep track pastorally of individuals.

*St Luke's, Dundee (Scottish Episcopal Church)*

*Rector: Revd Canon Kerry Dixon.* St Luke's describes itself as an 'Anglican evangelical church that welcomes everyone' and that it aims to 'explore life's issues from a faith perspective in a relaxed café atmosphere'.<sup>6</sup> When Kerry Dixon became rector, St Luke's was a small, traditional SEC congregation. They initially removed the pews and replaced these with tables and chairs, opening up the kitchen hatch to serve food and drinks, and focusing the room to the side, rather than towards the altar. More recently, they have moved the Sunday service into the church hall, meeting around tables. Dixon described the meetings at St Luke's as aimed at the 'non-churched ... rather than the churched or the de-churched'. The meetings are deliberately informal to encourage the accessibility of the community, as Dixon told me, 'We want a place where people can belong before they believe – you can come and sit and hang out, and you can get up and go if it's getting a bit intense for you. You can walk out and have a fag or go get a cup of coffee.' Thus, church meetings are typically more 'conversational' than formal, with short interactive talks. Demonstration of vulnerability is encouraged by making space for 'people to tell their stories, so people who have broken lives feel less judged'. Dixon described that this style of worship has attracted young families, who are drawn to a context in which they can allow their children to run around, and engage at their own pace, as well as marginalised individuals who might sleep rough, or who have drug addiction problems.

St Luke's sets out for its Sunday meeting to be missional. As Dixon describes it, the whole meeting 'is geared around the message' of the Gospel. This focus on the Gospel is not reflected merely in content (although this is clearly important to St Luke's), but the focus on accessibility is an attempt to model the welcome of the Gospel in action. Dixon told me a moving story of a young woman who was drawn to the community because she saw the way in which the meeting was centred upon the people and not the liturgy – whilst Dixon was speaking one Sunday, a member of the congregation with

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<sup>6</sup> St Luke's Dundee [website](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

mental health problems was visibly distressed. Rather than carry on the sermon, Dixon decided to stop and put his arm around the shoulder of the man and calm him down so that he could carry on preaching. For the young woman in question, this showed her something of the love found within the community. Reflecting on this incident, Dixon told me that:

Because relationship is much more important than anything else that we do. And there are times when you can see that folks, for whatever reason, are just restless and anxious. And we'll just say, let's just stop let's take a break. Let's get another cup of coffee. Let's just stop everything. And we'll come back in five minutes just take a break. Because it's about the needs of the folks it is not about institution or anything else.

Clearly, the informal café style liturgy used by St Luke's has facilitated this relationship centred approach to worship which allows them to care for the congregation, but which also serves as a model of evangelism to draw new people into the community.

Dixon admitted that in using café style church, St Luke's had drawn from aspects of contemporary culture, but, he noted, 'the Church has always bowed to culture. Otherwise, we'd still be doing services ... in Latin'. He suggested that this borrowing from culture was an important part of the mission of the Church: 'The Gospel is not for the Church. The Gospel is for the world.' Thus, for Dixon, engaging with culture is crucial for engaging the Gospel with the world; he described the church's use of culture as a form of 'communication' which allows the Church to 'communicate the good news of Jesus that God loves you beyond measure ... if that's what's wrapped in a package that nobody can understand or access, and you've ceased to fulfil the function you existed for'.

Despite being upfront about using aspects of culture to communicate the Gospel, Dixon admitted that this engagement was not without its risks or challenges, one of which being that café church 'adds to the consumer culture that we have' due to the huge numbers of resources (multimedia, talks, quizzes) that are needed to sustain the liturgy of café church, which lacks a set liturgy used every week. He also noted that formal cathedral worship has its benefits which café church could never bring, most notably, the richness and depth of the liturgy. Ultimately, for Dixon, both the café church and the cathedral are needed within the wider Church; St Luke's exists to fulfil a particular need within a particular community, but there is no illusion that this model of church is normative. In fact, Dixon suggested, having the cathedral as a standard of orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the

SEC, meant that somewhere like St Luke's was able to operate with a 'freedom to experiment' in engaging missionally with its community.

### *Zest Café, St Andrews*

*Owner: Lisa Cathro.* The final example is different from the first three in that it is not a church setting out to engage in Christian mission. It has no religious affiliation at all. Drawing comparisons with café culture more generally can help to flesh out our consideration of the intersection between culture and mission in café churches.

Zest is a café in St. Andrews, which is run as a social enterprise. Its vision is 'To inspire and transform lives through excellence in People Development and Social Inclusion', and it does so by striving 'To create meaningful work and learning opportunities for people with barriers to employment by embracing diversity and social inclusion'. They 'aim to take a holistic view of the person and put people above profit'. Zest employs a number of marginalised individuals with special needs and/or mental health issues, as well as offering placements for former convicts. Thus, as many of the congregational profiles suggested, this emphasis on social justice is something which appears to be prevalent within coffee culture, more generally, as well as in café churches.

Lisa Cathro, the owner, described this engagement with social issues as playing an important role in her business; she noted that people like to use Zest because they can support a charitable enterprise and contribute to the community. But she also noted that the quality of the produce served helped Zest to attract regular customers. As she told me, 'The majority of our customers are regulars' who like to go somewhere 'where they are known and know the staff who will be there.' Thus, the sense of community and belonging in an environment like Zest is striking. It is notable how the emphasis on social justice for its own sake as well as such engagement serving an almost evangelistic role in bringing people into the café was present even in a context like Zest.

Reflecting more generally on the attraction of independent cafés, Cathro told me that, 'People want to change their lifestyles, and often see cafés as relaxed and simple.' Independent cafés are able to stand out from chain cafés in their engagement with social issues. This is exemplified in Zest which clearly has both a loyal supportive customer base, and a strong engagement with social issues.

### *Reflection: Café culture and Church in dialogue*

Having considered four different contexts which reveal various aspects of the engagement between culture and the Gospel at play in café church, we

will now consider some conceptual questions which arise in the engagement between culture and mission.

First, a few brief comments on the nature of liturgy more generally. Whilst the term 'liturgy' might typically be associated with a certain kind of high-church ritual, the term has traditionally been used much more broadly to describe any ritual with a certain goal or *telos*. Liturgy comes from the Greek, *leitourgia*, which literally means 'work of the people', and was a term commonly used to refer to public work performed for the benefit of the state.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it also seems clear that each of us has our own daily rituals and liturgies with their own specific goals or *telos*, whether these involve watching Netflix after work, the supermarkets we shop at, or the routes we take to work. None of these rituals are neutral, almost every ritualised action we perform reflects something of what we value and contributes to some wider cultural liturgy.

According to Smith, liturgies, whether religious, cultural, or individual, reflect the things we desire and care about. To see this, he argues, we need to recognise that human beings are not primarily rational disembodied creatures as much post-enlightenment philosophy would have us believe, but rather, desiring, ritualistic, embodied creatures. All of our liturgical actions have some level of intentionality about them, even if this is at a pre-reflective level.<sup>8</sup> Thus, he argues, 'What distinguishes us ... [as human beings] ... is not *whether* we love, but *what* we love'.<sup>9</sup> Our culture is filled with liturgies which seek to orientate our desires in a certain direction. These liturgies orientate towards a certain way of existing in the world as embodied, affective creatures. For instance, the liturgies of retail therapy teach us to value our autonomy as individuals and the need to satisfy our pleasures to be truly happy. Thus, as Smith goes on to describe, the primary role of Christian liturgy is to encourage the cultivation of habits which can re-orientate the actions of individuals towards God's goodness in a way that becomes second-nature to them; Christian practices aim at *forming* our habits away from those values entrenched in us by culture which run counter to God's values, and towards the values of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> This occurs not through an acquisition of knowledge or an increase in understanding,

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<sup>7</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd edn revised and expanded (Abingdon Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 48–51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works* (Baker Books, 2013), p. 166.

but rather, through the development of the right kinds of habits and dispositions to re-orientate our desires.<sup>11</sup>

The discussion of liturgy as desire focused raises important questions for the engagement between worship, mission and culture. On a rationalist worldview, for instance, it might be assumed that the kinds of spaces occupied by café churches provide neutral environments which make worship more accessible to newcomers, especially those who have negative connotations with church buildings. As the contextual profile of G2 York indicated, some café churches clearly see the importance of meeting in so-called *third places*. Following Ray Oldenburg's analysis, a third place is a space which has the following features:

- It is neutral ground
- It is inclusive and promotes social equality
- Conversation is a natural activity
- It is frequented by regulars who welcome newcomers
- It is typically a non-pretentious homey place
- It fosters a playful mood.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, whereas the Church was once a place which had many of these features, this has been replaced by the coffee shop in our culture. Whilst churches might have once had these relational and welcoming qualities, increasingly, some have argued, churches are off-putting and hostile environments for new people to enter into. In contrast, Leonard Sweet, in his book *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, writes that:

Starbucks gives away a third place for very little money. This low-cost (to you) space is not the office and it's not your home. It's a much needed third place where you can connect with others in a different way.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, one of the missional pulls towards the café church movement is this attractive neutrality which allows newcomers to feel at ease, something which was reflected in some way in each of the contextual profiles we considered.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Da Capo Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Sweet, Leonard. *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Waterbrook, 2008), p. 131.

While there is clearly some insight in this discussion of ‘third spaces’, the analysis of the interaction between culture and mission in much of this work is fairly surface level. For the idea that retail environments are straightforwardly *neutral spaces* in the way envisioned by Oldenburg is problematic. Indeed, some have raised concerns with the apparent neutrality of such spaces. As Smith argues, the movement towards locating worship in attractational, ‘neutral’ spaces is that they ‘distil Jesus’ from the liturgical practices and contexts that have been inherited by the church over many centuries, while claiming to retain the core of the message in a familiar container.<sup>14</sup> The problem with this distillation, he goes on to argue, is that, these cultural settings:

are not just neutral containers or discardable conduits for a message. [...] what are embraced as merely fresh forms are, in fact, practices that are already oriented to a certain telos, a tacit vision of the good life. [...] when we distil the gospel message and embed it in the form of the mall, while we might think we are finding a fresh way for people to encounter Christ, in fact the very form of the practice is already loaded with a way of construing the world. The liturgy of the mall is a heart-level education in consumerism that construes everything as a commodity available to make me happy. When I encounter ‘Jesus’ in such a liturgy, rather than encountering the living Lord of history, I am implicitly being taught that Jesus is one more commodity available to make me happy.<sup>15</sup>

If Smith is right, this puts pressure on the idea of the neutrality of third spaces. These spaces might be familiar, but that doesn’t mean they are neutral. In fact, Smith warns here, distilling the Gospel into a culturally digestible form has severe implications for our presentation of what the Gospel *is*. Bringing the language and ritual of the coffee shop into the Church risks setting up the Gospel as another product for consumers to buy into. Indeed, this point was clearly acknowledged by all of the practitioners of café church I spoke to. Dixon spoke of the risks of consumerism through the vast amount of resources required to maintain café church. Duncan spoke of the recognition that they were drawing from ‘an environment which has given over to the gods of the age, given over to making money and spending money’. And Selveratnam spoke of the fact that many people today are

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<sup>14</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos Press, 2016), p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–77.

‘consumers of church’, describing the ways in which café church attempts to meet the needs of these consumers. So, these issues are clearly on the mind of those who engage in café church.

However, despite there being some clear insight in rejecting the neutrality of coffee shops, Smith’s rejection of this cultural repackaging of the Gospel is too heavy-handed. It seems possible to recognise the non-neutrality of coffee culture, without buying in wholesale to the vision of the good life it seeks to inculcate. The underlying assumptions of Smith’s critique seem to be articulated well by what Richard Niebuhr describes as the ‘Christ Against Culture’ model of understanding the engagement between culture and the Gospel. As Niebuhr presents it, this view ‘affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty’, leading to a ‘rejection of cultural society’ and a ‘clear line of separation ... between the brotherhood of the children for God and the world.’<sup>16</sup> Such a model is not without scriptural support or theological precedence, either. As Paul writes in Romans 12, for instance: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.’<sup>17</sup>

However, Niebuhr describes the ‘Christ Against Culture’ model as a ‘necessary and inadequate’ position to hold.<sup>18</sup> While a great deal of progress has been made culturally and theologically by those who hold this stance of radical opposition between Christ and culture, the shortcomings of such an approach are evident. It is simply impossible in this life to be solely dependent on Christ ‘to the exclusion of culture.’<sup>19</sup> Human beings can do no other than develop their language, their sense of self, and their relations to others in and through culture.

It is also clear that whilst there is evidence of *Christ against culture* within the pages of Scripture, there are also cases of different approaches at work. For instance, as Margaret M. Mitchell has argued in some detail, throughout I Corinthians, there is evidence that Paul is directly drawing from the political-philosophical thought of Greco-Roman discourses. For example, Mitchell argues that I Corinthians 1. 10 ‘is filled with terms which have a long history in speeches, political treatises and historical works

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<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper Torchbooks, 1951), pp. 45, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 12. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.



dealing with political unity and factionalism'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, discussing Paul's use of the body metaphor of I Corinthians 12, Mitchell writes that, there can be 'no doubt that I Corinthians 12 employs the most common *topos* in ancient literature for unity'.<sup>21</sup> This was a metaphor used commonly in ancient Greek philosophy and political thought to stress the unity of the state. Thus, whilst Paul stressed the opposition of his culture and the Gospel in many places, he also was not afraid to use the resources and language afforded by his culture to package its message. Presumably, this is because (i) Paul sees the emphasis on unity within political literature as valuable for the Church, and, (ii) Paul seeks to communicate in a language which is familiar to his audience. Both of these points seem clearly at odds with the 'Christ Against Culture' model.

The approach seen by Paul in I Corinthians also comes across in the contexts of café-church. The three practitioners I spoke to clearly saw a great deal of value within coffee culture which reflected the values of the Gospel. Duncan spoke powerfully about the values of welcome, hospitality, compassion which were reflected in café contexts, as well as the emphasis this helped to bring on the immanence of God. Both Duncan and Selveratnam noted that many cafés also place a strong emphasis on social justice and engaging with marginalised members of society. As the discussion of Zest, St. Andrews demonstrated, these are clearly values aimed at by independent coffee shops, and something which is achieved to a high degree of success. Seeing these Kingdom values at work within this cultural context provides an opportunity to affirm the values of the Gospel in a cultural language which, even if non-neutral, is relatable to many individuals. This came across strongly in Dixon's interview, who stressed that café church is primarily about communicating the message of the Gospel in a language which is relatable to non-churched individuals. All three contexts, then, sought to find reflections of Kingdom values in culture, and to draw from these cultural contexts to communicate the message of the Gospel more effectively.

Returning to the discussion of cultural liturgies, it seems that Smith assumes that finding points of Gospel resonance in contemporary culture must fall into the trap of what Niebuhr calls the 'Christ of culture' model, in which culture and the Gospel are neatly assimilable. But this is too quick. As Duncan noted in the context of St George's Tron, 'yes, we have a coffee shop, which invites people to come in ... [aiming to foster] the values of welcome hospitality, compassion', but in contrast to any other coffee shop, 'we are

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

doing it explicitly as a church and in Jesus's name.' Moreover, the 'Christ of culture' model is clearly not what Paul is advocating in I Corinthians in using political-philosophical methods and it seems clear that none of the contexts considered in section 2 advocate for this approach either. All three of the café churches I observed, spoke of the need to resist aspects of contemporary culture and seemed all too aware of the non-neutrality of coffee cultures as a conduit for communicating the Gospel.

A more nuanced approach is needed to retain Smith's insight that no culture context is neutral, whilst still recognising that there are methods of cultural engagement which are beneficial and effective forms of mission. A way of avoiding both the naivety of assuming that cultural contexts are neutral, and of the dismissive response that therefore they should never be borrowed from, is to affirm what Niebuhr calls the 'Christ and culture in paradox' model. This model seeks neither to draw sharp distinction between culture and the Gospel, nor to synthesise the two, but to hold these points in tension. The Christian should neither withdraw from culture, nor seek to become like culture on this model. This approach, which Niebuhr sees exemplified by Martin Luther, seeks to stress that we live 'between the times' of eternal happiness and our temporal sinful existence.<sup>22</sup> There are no hard and fast boundaries to be drawn between Christ and culture, for the tension lies not between culture and Gospel, but between sin and grace, between God and man.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the paradoxical model seeks to put emphasis on the grace of God to save human beings, but also on their continued sin and disobedience. As Niebuhr puts it, we must join:

the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world to be godless and sick unto death, [...] [whilst also affirming that] he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it, that God indeed sustains him in it and by it; for if God in His grace did not sustain the world in its sin it would not exist for a moment.<sup>24</sup>

Put in the language of cultural liturgies, this paradoxical approach seeks both to affirm the sinfulness of the practices of culture, whilst at the same time admitting that such practices are inescapable and infused with divine grace. The culture of coffee shops is both marred with the values of selfishness, individualism, consumerism and greed, and yet, it is filled with works of divine grace, mercy, hospitality, and love. If this view is to be affirmed, then the point must surely apply equally to the liturgies of coffee

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<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

shops as it does to the baroque architecture of traditional church buildings, and historical formal liturgies of the institutional church. These practices too contain an interweaving of human sin and divine grace, and to suppose otherwise would be to think that our religious culture is a gift descended from heaven without human influence. Whilst the language of paradox was not used in the contexts I observed; we can see this emphasis in the way that cultural engagement was described. For the overarching desire of these three church contexts was to find ways of communicating the love of God to generations unreached by the Gospel and seemingly put-off by cultural packaging of traditional church. This tension was particularly emphasised in St. George's Tron which sought to bring the hospitality and warmth of the coffee shop *into* the traditional architecture of the church, without removing it entirely. The space stands as a tangible example of paradoxical cultural engagement in which both the historical, traditional forms of church culture and the contemporary values of coffee-culture are blended and held in tension.

### *Conclusion*

I have explored some of the ways in which café churches draw from contemporary coffee culture in service of mission and evangelism. As we have seen, there is much within coffee culture which reflects the values of the Gospel, and which the Church can draw on to communicate effectively to a new generation. Moreover, there is not one approach to this engagement, and many different models have been used to bring coffee culture into the Church.

In reflecting on the implicit liturgies of coffee cultures, and the risks of distilling the Gospel into culturally relevant forms, we have seen that there is clearly no neutral space within which the Church can engage. Thus, I have sought to cast doubt on the analysis of the neutrality of so-called *third spaces*. Yet, I have argued, we need not follow Smith in rejecting this cultural repackaging of the Gospel, either. For there is clear evidence that there are gospel values reflected within coffee culture, and there is biblical precedent in using cultural forms to communicate the Gospel effectively. Finally, if café church approaches to mission and worship are to escape the challenges raised by Smith, then this paradox between the sin of culture and the grace of God at work within culture must be affirmed. If this nuanced, paradoxical stance is taken to thinking about cultural engagement with café churches, then I see no reason why café church in all its varieties cannot be of great service to the Church of God.