

The Acts 15 agenda

ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that the missional renewal of the church is integrally linked to its cross-cultural diffusion. The cue for this hypothesis is taken from Acts 15 and the letter to the Ephesians. After explaining what the Acts 15 agenda implies, the paper argues that the decline of Christianity in the West is linked to the absence of a multi-cultural Christianity caused by the long period in which the Christendom² paradigm deformed Christianity's theological DNA structure. The question is then asked what the missionary movement can teach us about the decline in typical mainline denominations and in Western Christianity. Three more specific hypotheses are then proposed to explain the growth and decline of typical mainline denominations anywhere in the world as well as in South Africa from 1911 to 1996. The point is then made that the situation can only be remedied if we look at the way we do theology and if we make room for the Acts 15 agenda and the Ephesian model. The continuing conversion of the church is linked to *not* making proselytes but by giving converts the freedom to inculturate the gospel. This should happen everywhere since culture is never static; it is always in a process of evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Andrew Walls published *The cross-cultural process in Christian history* in 2002. In his discussion of KS Latourette's phenomenal seven volumes on *A history of the expansion of Christianity* (1937-1945), he made the important observation that the expansion of Christianity, unlike Islam, has a serial nature (2002:27-48). "Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into the vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades" (2002:29). In the wake of the expansion of Christianity the recession of the former Christian heartlands took place. What is left of the church in Jerusalem, of the seven congregations founded by Paul in Asia, of Alexandria and the other centres of Christianity in Africa, even Europe today? Walls conclude (2002:32),

There is a significant feature in each of these demographic and cultural shifts in the Christian centre of gravity. In each case a threatened eclipse of Christianity was averted by its cross-cultural diffusion. Crossing cultural boundaries has been the life-blood of historic Christianity. It is also noteworthy that most of the energy for the frontier crossing has come from the periphery rather than from the centre.

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- 1 Keynote address at the 2002 Gospel and Our Culture Convention, Techny Towers, Chicago II, USA. Jurgens Hendriks is chair of the Department Practical Theology and Missiology at Stellenbosch University.
 - 2 Christendom refers to the period from Constantine to the Enlightenment and modernity characterised by the relationship between the church and the state in which one typically finds a "state church" (Bosch 1991:274-275).

The process of the movement of Christianity from one place to another and the principles that guide that process, are nowhere more prominent than in Acts 15. The earliest believers were devout Jews. They maintained observing the Torah, practised circumcision and culturally remained Jewish. When the Antiochene believers approached Jerusalem on the issue whether circumcision was a necessary requirement to be saved, the real question was between continuing the Jewish practice of making proselytes and accepting people who had a genuine conversion experience as Christians. The question was about the relationship between the gospel and a culture. Does Christianity mean becoming Jewish and following the Jewish customs? The astonishing decision was to place no Jewish cultural burdens on the Gentiles. They were thus challenged to find, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a Christian lifestyle within Hellenistic society. By doing this a truly Greek Christianity emerged that penetrated the Hellenistic intellectual and social heritage. The letters of Paul, Peter, James and John testify to this demanding struggle where every aspect of the culture was challenged by the gospel. Converts could associate with Christianity because it was translated into their own cultural world, addressing what was wrong and converting life itself in ways that witnessed to the central truths of the gospel but within their own social world and realities. The gentile theological agenda was one completely different from that of the Jewish one. They had to make Christ recognisable in a completely new world. Rodney Stark claims that Christianity grew on average 40% per decade during the first three centuries (1997:6-7). The centre of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to the West.

Acts 15 produced two distinct Christian lifestyles representing two distinct ethnic and cultural worlds. The result was not, however, two distinctly different Christian communities, a Jewish and a Gentile one. Paul addressed this issue in the letter to the Ephesians (2:11-13).

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) –¹²– remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. –¹³– But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Here we have two Christian lifestyles each representing a culture converted to Christ expressing something that the whole body needs. The tension that the different cultures had in working together illustrates the twin dangers: one being the instinctive desire to protect one's own version of Christianity and trying to establish it as the standard and normative one. The other, that Walls calls the more seductive one (2002:79) in the present condition of Western Christianity, is the post-modern option to decide that all versions of Christianity are at liberty to enjoy their own in isolation from the others. The Homogeneous Unit Principle of the Church Growth School will be but a variation on this theme (Bosch 1983:235-240). Walls conclude (2002:79), "None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ."

In due time the heartland of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to the Eastern Mediterranean, to Africa and to Rome. It should be clear that no one church, place, theology or culture owns Christ. When a candle died at one place, it was kindled at another. The cross-cultural movement of Christianity has been its life-blood. The church has been in principle both multiracial and multicultural from its very inception, the result, amongst others, of the Acts 15 agenda.

2. THE DNA STRUCTURE OF CHRISTENDOM

Circumstances led to the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 C.E. While the Jewish church was scattered the mission to the Gentiles was such an overwhelming success that the church and theology became as overwhelmingly Hellenistic-Western as once it was overwhelmingly Jewish. In time Western Christians have grown used to the idea that they were the “guardians” of “standard” Christianity (Walls 2002:78).

The demographic and cultural shift that is taking place as the Christian centre of gravity is moving from its former heartland provides a key to understanding the identity of Christendom, its weaknesses and strengths. It also provides us with spiritual guidance. Some of the basic conclusions Walls reached in surveying Latourette’s work are that (2002:29-30)

- the cross-cultural movement of Christianity, its cross-cultural diffusion, always provided new impetus for the growth in Christianity.
- the Christian faith must go on being translated to enter into the world, to interact with evolving culture. If this does not happen, it withers and fades away.
- the mission work of the Western Church more often than not originated from the periphery, from the initiative of Mission Societies and Student Movements, from the work of lay people, especially women, and not from the structures of the institutional church (Walls 2002:65).
- Christianity is finding itself in a new and decisive period of its history as its heartland is shifting from the West to other centres of gravity.

Against this background one may ask the simple question: **What can the missionary movement, obviously the most important development in modern Western Christianity, teach us about the situation in which the declining Western Christendom finds itself?**

Looking at more than 1500 years of history, one can discern certain patterns and develop a grasp of the DNA structure of Christendom.³ Wall’s argument is that the missionary movement should be seen as the connecting terminal (2002:34) between Western Christianity and the Christianity of the non-Western world. In exploring the relationship between the two worlds Walls (2002:34-47) proposed three hypotheses that I found of utmost importance to grasp:

2.1 His first point is that the history and outlook of Western Christians, their theological DNA structure, was shaped by the circumstances through which they received the gospel. The Roman Empire needed a unifying ideology to rule a world with too much diversity and pluralism. In order to have a united people they needed a unifying code. It made good political and economic sense, even today! The momentum and influence of Christianity was used to this effect. According to Stark’s analysis (1997:7) 33,9 million of the 56,5 million people of the empire were Christians by the year 350. In the process a form of territorial Christianity was born and a very specific relationship between the church and the state developed. It was very effective. Later the Protestant Reformation caused the division of Christendom but did not abandon the idea. *Cujus regio, ejus religio* became the Protestant norm. The Protestants were trying to reform Christendom in a

3 Walls (2002:36) defines Christianity as a religious system used to describe a particular system in comparison with other systems like Islam; Christendom, however, suggests an entity with temporal dimensions, something that can be plotted on a map and is associated with a single inherited civilisation.

religious way. The idea of a pure and Godly commonwealth, of a certain type of civilisation and an attitude of “rule and control” became to such an extent part of being church that very few people questioned it. One empire, one church had the indirect implication that one theology of what was right and what was wrong was also needed. Systematic Theology became extremely important: it was needed to keep the Christendom paradigm intact. The history around the 1053 split between the church of the West and the East underlined it, the Reformation too. Denominationalism has its roots here.

2.2 The second point is that the way in which Europe and the West colonised the Americas, Africa and Asia in the end led to the downfall of Christendom. The two terrible wars of the twentieth century put the final nails in the coffin. Western political and economical imperialism is, however, continuing this legacy with the holy war rhetoric between president Bush on the one hand and Saddam Hussein and the Taliban on the other hand.

Historians pointed out to what extent the earliest colonialism was done in crusading zeal, often with the assumption that conversion would be the natural fruit of conquest (Walls 2002:38). The way it was done by Catholics and Protestants differs. In the Protestant world the state’s involvement became less and most of the missionary work was done by Missionary Societies. Tension between mission and nominal Christian authorities became a regular feature. It was impossible to disguise the political, economical and self-righteous motives of the Western powers and the injustices done to the local people. In the end all of this has a direct bearing on the demise of Christendom. Culture domesticated and manipulated the gospel to such an extent that the person and message of Jesus Christ became obscure (Guder 1998:78).

2.3 “The third is that in keeping with the serial nature of Christian Expansion that seems so characteristic of the Christian faith, the dissolution of Christendom made possible a diffusion of Christianity that is now in process of transforming it” (Walls 2002:34).

After the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, a landmark in the history of mission, the two world wars curtailed most of the missionary planning and work. Unshackled from the bonds of Christendom, the natural process of inculturation advanced in the new heartlands of Christianity. The Acts 15 agenda and the Ephesian model were freed to encounter the cultures with the good news and to transform it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Acts 15 agenda may well lead to a diversity and pluralism of unprecedented scale. For those whose theological DNA structures were formed within the confines of Christendom where every region has to have its official religion backed by its denominational creeds and (Systematic) Theology, this is going to be very difficult to accommodate. The Acts 15 agenda is, however, balanced by the Ephesian call to unity (ecumenicity). It proved to be no easy exercise. The biblical challenge is, however, not to continue making proselytes of our own denominational brands of Christendom but to give converts the freedom to take the gospel to address their cultures.

3. AFRICA: FROM A LIMINAL PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the present requires interpreting the past, both of which is necessary in order to have a vision for the future. Analysing and interpreting Christendom is crucial in order to understand the state of Christianity in Africa. Africa is, however, in a *liminal* phase. Roxburgh’s explanation of this state of affairs is helpful (2000:64):

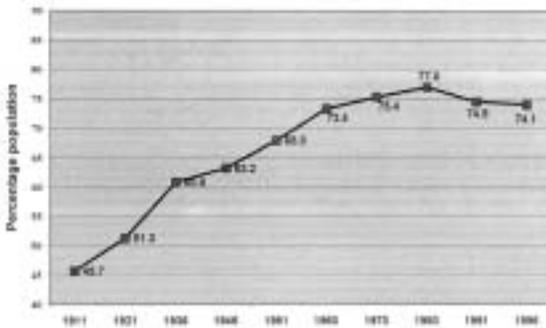
Put simply, the word describes the processes that go on within people when they are separated from their stable worlds and core values, then placed in an in-between world.

Liminality is very much like the experience of Robinson Crusoe when he was shipwrecked on a desert island. The shipwreck itself represents his separation from the world he has known and is skilled in managing.

I want to apply the concept of liminality to the situation in Africa. In South Africa the ideology of the apartheid period was in no small way influenced by Christendom. Since 1994 our country is a secular state. The old stable world (of whites) collapsed as it did in all the former colonies in Africa. The stable structures of modernity are also collapsing for those privileged enough to benefit from it. In many African countries to the North of South Africa, Zimbabwe being the tragic example *par excellence*, people are experiencing a terrible “in between” world: in between life and death (death because of poverty, drought, AIDS, political instability and corruption)! Africa cannot be described as a stable continent nor being a continent with functioning Christian core values. Our perspective from Africa is a liminal one.

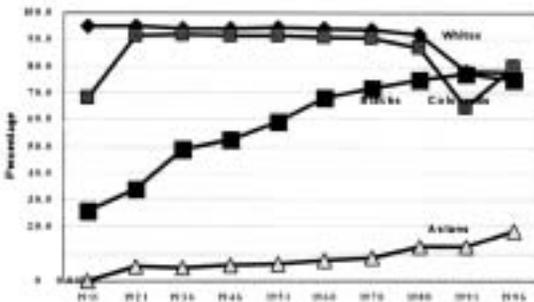
Taking a closer look at the religious scenario in South Africa (Hendriks 1995:35-58; Hendriks & Erasmus 2001:41-65) may illustrate some of the trends described in the historical overview.

Figure 1: Christians in South Africa 1911-1996



This figure shows that Christianity expanded until 1980 and then the typical Western recession began to register. Dividing the trend in racial groups, gives more information.

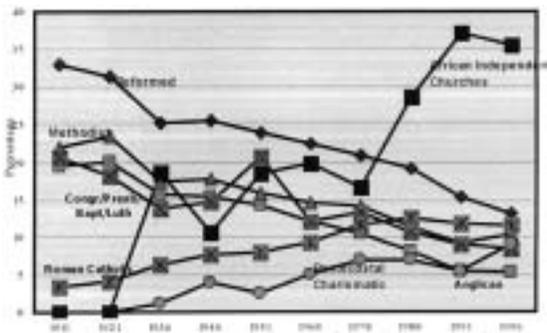
Figure 2: Percentage Christians in each population group



The general trend shows the decline in the white and coloured population groups and the steady growth in the black population group until 1991. After 1991 a slight decline is evident even in the black population group. Percentages can hide some aspects of a situation. In 1911 one million of the four million blacks counted (that is 26%) aligned themselves with the Christian faith. In the 1996 census the total number of blacks aligned to the Christian faith was 23 million out of a total of 31 million, 75% of all blacks thus were Christian. Numerically there is no decline; the growth, however, slowed down and the percentage Christians started to decline in the black population group.

In the Asian population group, culturally quite a distinct group in South Africa, there is steady growth. The two population groups that identify more strongly with the Christendom paradigm showed the typical decline pattern. An even more detailed figure will tell the story of what was happening in denominations.

Figure 3: Denominational market share trends in the total South African population



This interesting figure shows how the mainline denominations lost their market share. The Roman Catholic Church was not allowed in the Cape Colony until late in the eighteenth century. From then on its market share grew until 1980. The Pentecostal-Charismatic groups are also steadily increasing their market share. However, the most outstanding growth was with the African Independent Churches. Consisting of some 4000 groups,⁴ their phenomenal growth is by all means the most outstanding feature of the South African and African church scenario. The history of these churches is fascinating (Makhubu 1986; Sundkler 1961:38-64). Basically African leaders who were no longer content to serve under and be manipulated by the patronising style of mainline leadership broke away from the Christendom-styled denominations and founded their own churches. In many of these churches one can still find typical characteristics of the denomination from which they broke away. The African Independent Churches (AICs) inculturated the gospel and translated it especially for the black people who moved to the cities (Bekker *et al* 1993). These congregations, most of them small and in houses, acted as a safe haven where people could find fellowship, community, as well as spiritual and physical support. They were cared for by their own people in their own cultural ways (Cross, Oosthuizen & Clark 1993; Oosthuizen 1996:1-92). They grew and multiplied.

4 Stats SA 1996 has an unpublished list *Religions: summary code list* that is at the disposal of the author.

Following the Acts 15 agenda the gospel crossed cultural boundaries. Once it was freed from the cultural domination of Christendom's "standard Christianity", it showed vigour and expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the mainline denominations in South Africa. In the beginning there was a lot of uncertainty whether these churches can be called Christian.⁵ The theological framework used to assess the AICs was that of Christendom.

In some ways South Africa is the world within a country. The effects and decline of Christendom is evident, the growth of African Christianity too. The dilemma that mainline churches in the USA are experiencing has many parallels in the local Reformed (mainline) congregations (Hendriks 1995:43-49). The balance of power, however, is different in South Africa as well as in Africa at large. This may lead to different developments and patterns in congregations.

4. DOING THEOLOGY IN AFRICA

What do you do if you were born and bred in one of Christendom's denominations in Africa? NetACT (Network for African Congregational Theology) was formed to network Reformed-Presbyterian Theological Schools south of the Sahara.⁶ The emphasis on "congregational theology" has a specific motivation (Kelsey 1992:131-160). We acknowledged that seminaries could become an academic refuge, a comfort zone typical of the Christendom paradigm. Without being praxis based, theology can too easily become a way of training students to be proselytes of Christendom. Will we be able to change the way seminaries teach? (Roozen *et al* 1996). Will it be possible to develop leadership in our seminaries with a passion for a missional church, congregations, faith communities where every single member is empowered to think and do theology and take it upon themselves to make a difference in our continent with all its woes and challenges? The key question was: How do we understand and do theology in Africa⁷ without being dominated by Christendom and other cultures? We formulated our answer in the following way:

We believe theology is about (Hendriks 2002:11)

1. the missional praxis of the triune **God**, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and
2. about God's body, an apostolic faith community (the **church**)
3. at a specific time and place within a globalised world (**a wider contextual situation**),
4. where members of this community are involved in a vocationally based, critical and constructive interpretation of their present reality (**local analysis**),
5. drawing upon an interpretation of the normative sources of **Scripture and tradition**,
6. struggling to **discern God's will** for their present situation (a critical **correlational** hermeneutic),
7. to be a sign of God's kingdom on earth while moving forward with an eschatological faith-based reality in view (that will lead to a **vision** and a **mission** statement),
8. while obediently participating in transformative action at different levels: personal, ecclesial, societal, ecological and scientific (a doing, liberating, transformative theology that leads to a **strategy, implementation and an evaluation** of progress).

5 The strange pattern in the statistics of the AICs in figure 3 is explained by the uncertainty of those responsible for the population censuses whether the AICs should be regarded as Christian or not.

6 See the NetACT website for information: <http://www.sun.ac.za/theology/netact.html>.

7 See also Fiedler, Klaus, Gundani, Paul & Mijoga, Hilary 1997. *Theology cooked in an African pot*. Zomba Malawi: ATISCA.

Our objective was to define a methodology for doing theology in an African context. The plausibility structure (Berger 1990 [1967]) of Africans is unlike that of Christendom and modernity. The dichotomy between faith and reason is Western in origin. God is not called in question in Africa. We argued that doing theology ought to be, amongst others, a personal and congregational way of living in communion with Him. Our theology should seek a methodology that leads to transformation, a faith praxis, with inculturation as a natural by-product. We see inculturation as the continuation of the hermeneutical process of addressing and interpreting your culture, your changing contextual reality with the gospel. The hermeneutical process, however, should be done from the vantage point of converts, not proselytes. Proselytes are like intellectual or theological slaves. Converts are born again Christians true to their own identity (culture), who is trying to discern, in a fallible way, how to make sense of the gospel in their life, their culture. We can summarise doing theology by repeating the definition in another way:

- Theology is about discerning the will of God in faith-communities,
- that leads to their active involvement in church and society,
- this being their reaction to the presence of a triune, missional God
 - * who speaks to us through Scripture and tradition,
 - * in our context
 - * and who beckons to us from the future.

In essence then, we believe theology is about discerning the guidance of the triune missional God who leads us to bring the gospel to our people and culture. This discernment starts “on the ground” with an Isaiah 61:1-2/Luke 4:17-19 program. It starts “from the bottom upwards” and as such is inherently contextual as all theology actually is (Hall 1991:63, 93-110). The point to emphasise is that we need a theology that does not dominate or manipulate the present situation and culture with “old” contextualised theology from previous centuries that actually addressed other agendas and is usually infected with other ideologies, as much of Christendom theology is. In academic terminology we can say that the scientific methodology that we need now is that of participatory action research (De Vos 1998:406-418). This approach in fact is applying the Acts 15 agenda.

If discernment is the essence of doing theology, what does it involve? Our answer was to say that theology is more than a scientific endeavour that begins and ends with analysing texts and contexts (Ammerman 1998:27-29). Memory, eschatology, imagination and action play important roles in finding new answers to situations where discernment is taking place. As such, it involves music, art, narratives, the ability to dream, waiting upon God, using ritual and image-elements through which God can reveal his Word, his answers, and a new vision in any culture according to the ways of that culture.

4.1 Discernment presuppositions

The following discussion concentrates on the “how” of discernment by examining the presuppositions of the process (Hanson 1986:523-537; Hall 1991:93-110; Newbigin 1986:60-64).

The triune God is the One who takes the initiative in creation, redemption and sustaining creation. Discernment is a process in which the faith community depends on the Holy Spirit’s initiative to lead the community to discover God’s will in order to participate in God’s missional praxis. Faith and trust in God is the ultimate ground of discernment and as such conversion or being born again opens up this new plausibility structure. It opens up the dimensions of mystery and miracle, myth and faith or trust (*fiducia*) that is able to deal with the other plausibility structures of this world.

In this process **Scripture has an integral place** because it bears testimony to the confessional responses of a people who have experienced God’s fellowship within a covenantal relationship.

The Bible should not be interpreted with a static view of authority, that is a collection of immutable laws and infallible truths (Hanson 1986:535). We receive the biblical witness through fallible people in different contextual settings – settings that one must comprehend. The trustworthiness of this witness resides in the transcendent dynamic discernible as an unbroken golden thread that runs through Scripture (1986:525) and does not stop at the end of the biblical era (1986:532). A faith community is not an archive where members study records about ancient happenings, nor is it an institution that perpetuates bygone structures. It is a community that participates in an ongoing drama, initiated and led by the living triune God (1986:533). A faith community's traditional creeds and confessions, likewise, are important witnesses of their quest to understand God's will.

The context within which the faith community receives God's guidance, his perspective and empowerment that enable a theological understanding and discernment, is the gathering of those who continue to live in communion with God (Hanson 1986:525). In other words, **only those whose lives are drawn into the orbit of God's praxis can truly understand this** (Newbigin 1986:60). Discernment, therefore, takes place incarnationally; truth is practiced, missional in its very being (Hunsberger 2002:102-103) since it is always based on the initiative-taking God's praxis.

This implies that theology cannot be an abstract academic discipline apart from a faith community's life and struggle to discern God's ongoing praxis (Kelsey 1992). Religious Studies is a study of religions in an objective, scientific way, but **theology can be done only from within the community of the faithful** (De Gruchy 1994:12). Discernment takes place in a faith environment where personal faith is actually integrated faith, integrated in relationships, in an obedient, missionary community (Hunsberger 2002:101-102). This implies that everyone within such a community has a direct or indirect role or place in the process of discernment (Mouw 1994).

Faith communities link with, and are influenced by, **past and present** faith communities, which leads to **diversity and unity** (Newbigin 1986:60). The diversity is due to the fact that there are, and have been, many local faith communities all over the world. They find their unity in their communion with God. Therefore, discernment should take place with a realisation of this unity of being one family sharing a common vocation and destiny. As such it applies the Ephesian model that creates room for the ecumenical dimension of discernment.

The discernment needed for a faith community's participation in God's missional praxis, is **integrally linked with worship**. In their worship and participation in the sacraments, a faith community directs its focus to God from whom all goodness flows. The whole liturgy endeavours to help this focus on God to be finely tuned. Worship is active participation in a correlational hermeneutic event in which the triune God's mysterious, guiding presence is active. This is where vocation is received and a sense of destiny is born.

Discernment can take place only **if penultimate or secondary concerns are not placed before God's praxis** (1 Thes 2:1-12). Good examples of such concerns are churches' focus on institutional structures, church law and regulations, national ideologies, as well as on personal ambitions with regard to status, power, financial gain and physical issues. Political ideologies are typical **penultimate** concerns. Anything that receives a primary focus and attention and, as such, obstructs God's missional praxis, becomes an idol (Hanson 1986:527).

In addition to the previous point, you can test your focus by **examining the ultimate human purpose that is to praise, worship and glorify God** in your personal life, communities and institutions. We, together with our communities and institutions, are not entities in our own right, living as independent kingdoms; we must be aligned to God's mission and glory. At the very moment when denominational "fear of death" sets in, when our own agendas are threatened, we normally focus upon ourselves, not upon God (Guder 2000:189). The best illustration of a

successful letting go of the self is the *Via Dolorosa*: Jesus' choice to go the way of the cross. In Gethsemane He prayed: "Not my will, but your will be done." By dying unto Himself recreation took place, and the principalities and powers were obliterated.

5. THE CONTINUING CONVERSION OF THE CHURCH

In this last section we deal with the question of the continuing conversion of the church.⁸ From an African perspective it is interesting to see who is asking this question. In Mozambique, for example (Chikakuda 2001:42-47), such a question is not even contemplated. People are hungry to receive the Word of God; the church is growing at an unprecedented scale after 35 and more years of war and suffering. The gospel is good news bearing fruit in the lives of converts and communities. The scenario is strikingly different from that faced by the GOCN in the USA or for that matter in South Africa.

Those of us who are asking the question about the continuing conversion of the church are by and large those in the mainline denominations who are struggling to escape the spiritual and ideological legacy of the Christendom paradigm to which we are heirs. Prophets like Lesslie Newbigin (1989) and David Bosch (1991) had insight in the different worlds of our time and opened our eyes to what is happening. We see our children dying. Our situation is very much like that of Israel in Egypt (Ex 3-15). We do not want to be associated with the Pharaoh, but the fact of the matter is that Western economic, cultural and political imperialism is but another form of revived colonialism. The morals and motives of the system in which most of us live and from which we benefit materially, are questionable. It seems as if the Christendom virus has adapted to a new time and age and is leading to a spiritual AIDS pandemic of enormous proportions. We have the statistics of the "death of the church" in Europe and the Christendom heartlands at hand (Belgium: Dobbelaere 1988; Britain: Brierley & Sanger 1999:2.7-2.15; Brierley 2000; The Netherlands: Dekker 1992; Dekker & Noordegraaf 1995; USA: Finke & Starke 1992; Roozen & Hadaway 1993; Hoge, Johnson & Luidens 1994; Gallup 1999). The light of many a candle is flickering and about to be blown out.

The GOCN USA meeting in 1999 dealt with the theme of the influence of the principalities and the powers. A flood of literature in the Western world is addressing these issues (Berkhof 1962; Yoder 1972; Wink 1984, 1992). It underlines the awareness that we have been blinded by the rationalistic approach to science and theology. The point is: the system in which we are living is killing us spiritually. The system is good for most mainline denominations, it's the fleshpots of Egypt world, but: it domesticated the gospel (Newbigin 1989:200-210; Guder 1998:78) and within a generation or three our children dies (Regele 1995).

The critical question is: How does one escape the influence of a system?

My liminal perspective is that of a white Dutch Reformed Church member in Africa, a Western-African. A few remarks may lead to a discussion that may open new windows. We were caught in the apartheid system, a system that in the end enslaved everybody. Nobody caught in an evil system is free. My church supported that system. The road to freedom was a long and difficult one. How did it happen?

The Acts 15 agenda and the Ephesian model supply an answer. The prophetic voices in our church and the voices of those in other denominations and worlds were never silent. The leaders

8 The theme of the 2001 GOCN USA consultation. See Guder 2000. *The continuing conversion of the church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

of the ruling party of this day, the African National Congress, and the leaders of the African Independent Churches grew up together. Both challenged the existing system of the Christendom paradigm, though from different perspectives. They refused to be proselytes. In a fallible way they took the way of the cross.

In South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and what happened there, freed those who had eyes to see and ears to hear (Tutu 1999; Krog 1998). Our local Presbytery, our Seminary and our denomination at large confessed at the TRC. Some of us have been preparing the ground for this on a congregational level ever since 1986. The people and congregations who confessed and actually became involved in reconciliation and restitution are the congregations that are in the process of regaining their missional character and are being transformed by the presence of the Triune God.

It is the Holy Spirit that drives the Acts 15 agenda. Denominations and congregations that do not venture out and address the context prophetically, that do not follow the Isaiah 61/Luke 4 programme find it hard to stop the slow rot of institutional decline (Fung 1992). Their most active members move to other congregations or serve in parachurch organisations.

Personally I am convinced that new church (congregational) development or church planting is a necessity in such circumstances. The identity of Christendom congregations does not change easily; they are kept intact by powerful patriarchs and matriarchs. They resist moving cross-culturally as new sub-cultures develop in society. They use tradition, a top-down authoritative leadership style and a form of Christendom theology to invalidate the Acts 15 agenda. In such a situation transformation or conversion is difficult. New church development, church hopping or church planting is alternatives to the slow decline patterns in such institutions.

This challenge to discern how to once again become a missional church in Africa applies to all mainline denominations and congregations in our continent. I believe the Acts 15 agenda and the Ephesian model should guide us on the way to break away from dysfunctional systems.

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