

“Ecclesiogenesis”

Base ecclesial communities in contemporary perspective



Author: Dr Paul Davies is Tutor and Postgraduate Studies Programme Leader at All Nations Christian College.

Introduction

Are traditional church structures the baby—so important as never to be thrown out—or the bathwater—they can be summarily ejected in order to make the church more ‘relevant’? The emergence of the Base Ecclesial Community (BEC) movement in Latin America challenged the structures of the traditional church, especially the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Some thought of it as marking the death of the traditional church and birth of a new church. The cry would be ‘The Church is dead, long live the church!’ We will briefly examine how the BECs did challenge the church and what we can learn from this challenge.

The BECs were small groups of socially and politically active laity, who met together regularly to read the Bible, pray and reflect theologically and practically upon their social and political activity. They were normally led by either a member of the laity or by a religious—a monk or nun and their rhythm of action and reflection formed the basis of the theological reflection of the early theologies of liberation.

History

In the mid-nineteen fifties, and early nineteen sixties militant members of Catholic Action and other socially involved Christian groups such as Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) started to reflect upon their social activity and the reasons behind the poverty they were discovering. This led them to become critical of the response of the Roman Catholic hierarchy (cf. Coleman 1958:33) and other traditional Christian responses. Subsequent to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and especially after the Medellin meetings of the ‘Latin American Ecumenical Council’ (CELAM 1968), they began to reflect in a more theologically consistent way on their action in the light of their faith (cf. Boff, L 1985:131-137; Cook 1985 and Dawson 1998). A movement was born.

Description and reflection

There are various features that are worth highlighting with regard to the BECs. Firstly, the BECs were born out of obedience. The people meeting together defined the church as those gathered around Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, however, is the one who is to be found among the poor. Being a member of the church started, therefore, with the act of obedience to be with the poor. This is what Leonardo Boff has called an ‘ecclesiogenesis’ (the birth of the church.) He said ‘the true ecclesiogenesis, that is, the genesis of the Church, is born of the faith of the people’ (Boff, L. 1985:131). This is, of course, a radical departure from traditional and even post-Conciliar Roman Catholic ecclesiology (cf. Kärkkäinen 2002: 26ff and Dulles 1988). It is not even Bonhoeffer’s ‘the church-for-others’ (Bonhoeffer 1971:382f.), or Puebla’s (1979) ‘the preferential option for the poor’ but rather the fact of the poor as constituting the locus of the true church.

Secondly, they were orientated towards people rather than institutions. The BEC was defined by the members of the group rather than by the church hierarchy or by theologians. This is not to say that they denied hierarchy or theology but, in the ways the BECs were being church, hierarchy was not primary and theology was secondary. This meant that the place of

the BEC within the established church was ambiguous. It claimed to be church without priests, bishops or pope.

I would guess that one of the biggest criticisms of the hierarchical and traditional churches is the emphasis upon institutions and structures rather than on people. The BECs did not deny the structures but they were not primary. Does this mean we throw out structures and institutions? I think not. Max Weber has clearly shown the importance of structures for the continuity of any movement (Weber 1947). I do think, however, that a constant theological and open reflection needs to be made as to whether the institutional structure is taking priority over people. The identification of how this is expressed will be, of course, different in different cultures and even churches but I feel this is one of the major lessons we must learn from them. The structures are bathwater, which can be periodically ejected in order that the baby itself remains clean; i.e. it remains people centred.

Additionally, for the BECs, theologians and clergy were welcome, but as members not particularly as leaders. It is interesting to note that the BECs that were most successful were ones led or facilitated by laity or religious not by clergy. It was in the real sense of the phrase 'lay initiated and lay led.' This is not to say that the BEC leaders were not theologically educated, in fact education was very important within the BEC movement, but this education, sociological and theological was done far more informally. It is also interesting to note how leaders of BECs were often the targets of persecution, arrest and even death squads.

The issue of leadership is another area of importance where we can learn from the BECs. Dynamic leadership with true commitment is important. Effective leadership comes not from status or position within the organisation but from demonstrated commitment and gifting. The priest was often viewed with suspicion because he presented a status rather than a commitment.

Furthermore, the self understanding and leadership style of the BECs led them to be primarily prophetic rather than priestly. The Eucharist may have been celebrated but the 'priestly' elements of the life of the church were not prominent. Prophetic action and announcement and reflection upon that action were much more important. The BECs were a prophetic community in transit towards the world. This leads to the fact that the BECs were praxis or mission driven. Identity was not defined in doctrinal categories but through praxis and what that praxis highlights. The starting point was not 'what is nature of the true church' but 'what is the mission of the true church'? This made the BECs reflective; i.e. action is primary and reflection follows. A church is not a church without action—praxis is primary.

The missionary nature of the church has been declared in almost all Christian traditions but the outworking of that missionary nature is rarely seen. Mission should be the air of the church, the atmosphere in which it lives and thrives. The BECs were an example of a small group within the wider church for whom mission was the primary purpose for their existence.

It is difficult for the established and hierarchical church to express this. It tends to have too much to do to maintain itself. The structure, however necessary it may be, absorbs time, money and effort. The small group does have an advantage here and can be more directly mission orientated.

The Bible became, for many BECs the inspirational tool of missiological reflection. The importance of the Scriptures was not universal across the BEC movement but it certainly came to a much greater prominence after Medellin (1968). One sociologist, comparing the BECs and the Pentecostals in North Eastern Brazil, notes that although the main object of the BECs was reflection on social and political action, many members of the BECs came to a closer relationship with God through the reading of the Bible (Mariz 1993: 78-79).

The centrality of the reading of Scripture has to be one of the most important factors in the maintenance of missionary enthusiasm in the small group. The BECs saw within the pages of the Bible reflections of their own struggles. They saw the disciples as a small, struggling

group, attempting to live out their faith in a hostile environment. These reflections cannot be done on a grand scale; can only be done in small groups, reading and reflecting together.

Finally, apart from being an ecclesio-genesis, the BECs also became a locus theologogenesis of Latin American theologies of liberation; the place where theology is born. Because of their small group nature, the BECs generated theology. They were not beholden to priests and other clergy, but in small groups they generated new theological insights which would never have emerged from a seminary or from a theologian's pen. Clodovis Boff speaks of three levels of theology: the popular, the pastoral and the professional (Boff, C. 1993:1-21). Popular theology was generated by the BECs. This was normally expressed in informal ways, for instance, through dramas, songs or pamphlets. Pastoral theology took the popular and reflected upon it from the wider context of leadership. This was often expressed in sermons or more formal talks. Professional theology took the issues raised by pastoral theology to a more abstract level and there was given greater rigour. The professional theology then informed the pastoral theology and the pastoral theology was able to encourage and refine the popular.

Just as the BECs were the place where new theology emerged so new expressions of church can serve as a locus theologogenesis. The danger is that if theology is the preserve of the hierarchical church or, God forbid, of theologians, it will become the locus theologimoribundus—the place which marks the death of theology. Theology becomes the dead repetition of irrelevant doctrine that has no place in the church.

Conclusion

The BECs challenged the traditional structures of the hierarchical church in various ways. They prioritised people over structures, laity over clergy, prophetic action over priestly ritual, orthopraxis over orthodoxy, Bible study over Eucharistic celebration and bottom-up theological reflection over top-down autocratic religion. All of these elements have massive implications for mission and church planting both here in the UK and further a field.

In sum, I agree with Martin Luther's famous saying: *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*: 'the Reformed Church in constant reformation'. So, in the light of the BECs, how do I answer the question whether traditional ecclesial structures are the baby or the bathwater? The structures are the bathwater, they can never be sacralised. The church is the people; the structures must serve the church as the people, not the other way round. Having said this, the structures are expressions of the church as people and cannot be considered to be simple accoutrements, to be ejected because they do not suit the present epoch. Avante garde groups, such as the BECs within the wider church need to be welcomed and given a voice so that the bathwater will serve the baby in all its needs.

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