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The place to start an investigation of Moltmann's theology of the church is to ask what he finds problematic about the church as we often experience it. The church, he argues, is far too often a *societas incurvatus in se*-a community that is turned in on itself and closed to the outsider, to what is different, painful, or "other." It is a church where like-minded people gather together in a closed circle and those who are excluded are left in cold isolation.² The exclusive church struggles to find vitality because it is self-absorbed and closed to the inbreaking of God's Spirit, who blows where God will in all of created life. Even when theologians think about the church, their very categories are frequently ecclesiocentric and do not reveal the essential groundedness of all of life-including the church's life-in the beneficent Spirit of God²

Thus, the dominant criticism that Moltmann levels against the often fallen church and the way it understands itself is a criticism of self-absorption. This criticism plays out in a number of ways.

First, Moltmann rejects false conceptions of the church's *koinonia* or "friendship community." The church's *koinonia* is too often predicated on uniformity. It is the friendship of like with like or of "birds of a feather who flock together." Against this model of *koinonia* Moltmann lifts up the recurring biblical affirmation of the value of the stranger and wayfarer, the outcast and sinner. The church cannot be a boat of sameness afloat in a sea of othermess. In the person of Jesus Christ, the church's founder, we see one who embraces those who do not conform to the dominant paradigm of what a whole person is, and we also see in Jesus a profound openness to life in all of its differentness that contrasts sharply with the hardness, coldness, and narrowness of many of the religious leaders of his time. Jesus reveals the true nature of God, whose very being is characterized by the Trinitarian *koinonia* (Moltmann's term is actually *perichoresis*) of those who are different–God as source of being.

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Eternal Word, Holy Spirit. Thus, for Moltmann, the miraculous good news about the *koinonia* of the Trinity is that it is characterized not by the friendship of uniformity, but by a unifying friendship that respects and includes differentness. Where for humans "three is a crowd" and far too often a number symbolic of broken community, we discover in God that three friends are better than two or one—that multiplicity and variety only enrich the divine *koinonia* of what we are invited to be a part.

Moltmann's second criticism grows out of the first, namely, if the church's identity cannot be self-determined, then neither can its purpose or mission be self-serving. In defining his purpose in writing The Church in the Power of the Spirit, his most important work on ecclesiology, he states that the book's intention is "to point away from the pastoral church that looks after the people, to the people's own communal church among the people."4 The church must "become a living hope in the midst of the people."5 This is put more sharply in Theology of Hope where he argues that the church is "nothing in itself, but all that it is, it is in existing for others. It is the Church of God where it is a church for the world."6 The goal of the church is not to save the world by gathering the world into the church, as many advocates for Christian mission have assumed, but, rather to bear witness to the reconciling work of God already begun in the world by the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.7 Moltmann often likes to use Paul's metaphor for the church as the "firstfruits" of the new creation. The church is not separate from the world, nor is the redemption message at its core a nonworldly message. Rather, by virtue of existing in solidarity with the "whole longing and waiting creation" in all of its "otherness," it finds hope in the coming future where the Spirit of God makes all things new.8 Therefore, in undertaking its mission, the church does not regard the others to whom it is sent-the poor, the sick, and the rejected, for example-as objects of Christian outreach, but rather as subjects, or better, co-subjects in the kingdom of God.9

In order to understand Moltmann's conception of the doctrine of the church correctly it is essential to understand that the primary and prior consideration is always the redemptive work of the Trinitarian God in the created world. The church's purpose may be to bear witness to this activity or to be its firstfruits, but it is clearly not an entity or category that exists "above" or "before" the world which God embraces. Thus, for example, in discussing the Sabbath, Moltmann argues that we miss the whole point of the Sabbath if we think it exists only for the church. In fact, it is impossible to enjoy it without doing so with those outside the church, for first and foremost it is a "fundamental structure of creation itself."¹⁰ This is why, also, for example, Moltmann goes to great lengths in the *Spirit of Life* and elsewhere to overcome the false bifurcation between the Spirit of God who sustains all life and draws it to God and the Spirit of God who comes to the church empowering its mission. It is, in fact, the case that God's Spirit is one, if differentiated, and that a true *ecclesial* appreciation of the Spirit will necessarily entail the continual prayer for the universal coming of the Spirit throughout *all* creation.¹¹

Identifying Moltmann's ecclesiology is challenging at times precisely because of his thoroughgoing commitment to the solidarity of the church with the world and the church's basis in God's worldly, life-giving love. This is not because he devalues the church, but because of his profound belief in the open friendship of God towards all creation that ought to characterize those who claim to be the firstfruits of that friendship. His conviction about the fundamental grounding of the church in God's life in the world is

matched by his condemnation of a church that seeks to find a place of superiority over the world. To this *third* problem we now turn.

From his earliest writings, Moltmann denounces mission and ministry when they are excuses in extending the church's "sovereignty" and the "privileges accruing from the cult of the absolute."¹¹ The church and its officials are called to point to the hope of all creation, not by "churchifying" the world but through suffering and action."¹³ In other words, the church cannot point to itself nor can it understand itself even to be the primary instrument through which God's redemptive future for the world is effected. Most assuredly, then, the church cannot claim privileges for itself by virtue of an alleged superiority to the world, nor can it infer an *implicit* superiority by its supposed removal from the world into a spiritual or sectarian ghetto.

Nowhere does he make this point more compellingly or dramatically than in the *Crucified God:* "The crucified Christ is a challenge to the Christian Church."¹⁴ In his second chapter on "The Resistance of the Cross Against its Interpretations," Moltmann argues that the church can only find life when it embraces its origin in the cross of Christ and God and claims "its own strangeness and homelessness in its own Christian world."¹⁵ The cross is the final critique of the church's "deification of the human heart, the sacralization of certain localities in nature, certain dates and times ... and every established holy place which promises permanence."¹⁶ Therefore, any attempt to place the church above the world only removes the church further from its source of life, because the church only exists insofar as it is cruciform. In the cross of Christ at its core it finds the fundamental contradiction to all that deifies or elevates or removes it in relation to the created world around it. It is not called to success or supremacy but to cross-bearing and solidarity with the homeless and restless whose lives describe that of the church's founder.¹⁷

The frequent lack of correlation between the life of the church and that of Jesus and of the God Jesus reveals is the core of Moltmann's critique of the church as we often experience it. Even though it says so, the church does not always cling closely to the affirmation that "the church's first word is not 'church' but 'Christ'."¹⁶ Over and over again Moltmann strives to turn the church's eyes away from itself and towards Jesus Christ and God's unfolding history with the world. The ongoing and future *Missio Dei* in the world is the basis for the church's existence and identity. Mission is not a creation or property of the church; it is the *milieu* out of which the church emerges as a discernable witness to its founder.¹⁹

How does Moltmann resolve the obvious contradictions between the Church and Christ? He does not do so; in fact, he accentuates them. But, in light of these contradictions, rather than surrender to fatalism or to a promethean humanism, he reminds readers that there is always hope for the church precisely on account of the ongoing missionary activity of God in the world that determines the church's existence in the first place. While the church "continually realizes and compromises" God's missionary activity, nonetheless it lives from the surplus of God's promise that continues to overcome its failed realizations of that promise—it lives from the "added value of God's salvation."²⁰ In *remembering* what God has done and *hoping* for what God will do in the world (two essential dynamics in Moltmann's theology) the church can continue to live with confidence and joy in the face of its and the world's continuing brokenness.²¹

If Moltmann's dominant critique of the church is an account of its tendency to close

itself off from God and God's world, his dominant affirmation is of the church of open friendship. The dedication in front of *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* illustrates this affirmation: "To the World Council of Churches ... and oppressed Christians throughout the world." Moltmann's positive ecclesiology is marked by friendship with (1) those who are different, *i.e.*, the ecumenical church, and friendship with (2) those who suffer at the hands of others namely, the oppressed. Moreover, as the sub-title to the same book makes clear, Moltmann's ecclesiology is "Messianic"—marked by (3) imaginative openness to the future that is coming in the risen Christ.

Moltmann consistently makes the case that a Christ-based ecclesiology will embrace differences and the lack of absolute solutions to tensions in the church this side of the eschaton. In his conclusion to *Theology of Hope*, for example, he argues, following Hegel, that "a thing is alive only when it contains contradiction in itself and is indeed the power of holding the contradiction in itself and enduring it."²² The church must remain open to the destabilizing but enlivening future of the crucified Christ.²³ Moltmann repeatedly strives to counteract the tendency in the church to absolutize penultimate solutions to practical and doctrinal problems. Such false absolutisms invariably marginalize or exclude those who need inclusion and serve to preserve an unjust status quo, whether within or outside of the church. The church's mission is to pray—and enact the prayer—of the early church, "Let thy kingdom come and this world pass away."⁴⁴ In a fundamental sense the church is called by its eschatological hope in Christ to be a destabilizing influence in society and the lives of its members. It refuses to regard any unjust status quo as unchangeable. It helps people feel the galling pain of their chains and turns "quiet apathy into noisy protest."²⁵

Contrary to dominant social paradigms, Moltmann argues that a healthy human community—and by inference the church—is marked by its capacity to adapt to change, conflict and suffering, and to do so with strength and grace.²⁶ Healthy community is not marked by the absence of conflict but by how it *handles* such conflict. Citing the examples of Bonhoeffer and the Taize Community, he extols a model of Christian community that finds consolation and encouragement in the coming kingdom of God, but at the same time does not surrender the world to self-destruction. Such a community of faith joins with all who are working for healing and wholeness in the world while at the same time prayerfully expressing the willingness to wait for God and God's activity.²⁷

However, true *koinonia* means more than accepting and embracing tensions and conflicts. It is about accepting and embracing each other and God. The ultimate mark of true *koinonia* is friendship. Borrowing from Kant, Moltmann defines friendship as combining affection and respect.²⁸ In true friendship, there is "uncoerced respect and uncoerced affection."²⁹ God is free to be God; you are free to be you; I arn free to be me. Yet, in true friendship, we are joined in care and affection for one another. Indeed, none of us are fully ourselves without living with each other in such friendship. In explaining a German word for hospitality, *gastfrei*, Moltmann lifts up the necessary tension between *koinonia* as sharing and *koinonia* as freedom:

The person who is *gastfrei* does not dominate any of his guests, *nor is he ever without guests*. He is capable of fellowship with strangers. He lets them share his life, and is interested in theirs.³⁰

The open friendship of the new *koinonia*, however, needs to be more specifically defined. It is not just a friendship that embraces differences and tensions among people; it is a friendship that embraces those who *suffer*. It is not enough to say that just as God loves the "other," so ought the church to love its "others." To Moltmann, real love and the *koinonia* it engenders presupposes God's and our suffering, both as an essential quality of our vulnerable caring and as an experienced characteristic of our life of solidarity with the suffering of the world. Those who will not open themselves to suffering cannot love.³¹ Indeed, it is only as the church takes suffering into itself that it can "infect people with hope," for thereby the good news it proclaims becomes believable.³² People who suffer-particularly the oppressed–deeply long for the consolation that comes from the solidarity of others with them. Over and over again Moltmann lifts up the fact that in the Exodus, God does not merely liberate people from oppression, God remains with those who are being liberated as their comforter and as the basis for their continued struggle.³³ So also, then, ought the new *koinonia* to stand in abiding solidarity with those who are not yet free from systeming whether within or outside of the community of faith.

Suffering often divides people on account of a "lifeboat" mentality. Healing or freedom is commonly perceived as a limited commodity to be competed for by "haves" and "have-nots." But, according to Moltmann, the church has received the messianic secret: "Wounds are healed through wounds."³⁴ When the church takes on suffering rather than seeking to shift it to others, we spread healing and peace to those around us and find health in the deepest sense, even if we die in the process.³⁵ Such a willingness to move towards health via suffering and death presupposes a profound eschatological faith. When the church stands up for and with those who are suffering, it lives from the future promised to it in Jesus Christ.³⁶ It lives, finally, from a future and present joy.

The open friendship of the new *koinonia* is not ultimately about suffering, but about the *creative* love that goes out from God and gathers creation and God's people to God. In the final sense, the church exists to celebrate the superabundant love at the core of its existence. By embracing tension and difference, conflict and suffering, the church that lives in open friendship reaps the benefits of this embracing: vitality and the ability to feel love and joy. It becomes a community that is imaginative, that sees beyond all unjust or unresolved "givens."³⁷ It resists passivity.³⁸ It is a community that laughs at death and hell, that dares to taste the joy of God's freedom, that dances and is playful in the face of the "standardizations" and confusion of this world.³⁹ It is not content simply to see things restored to their former greatness, real or imagined, but works and waits for God's new creation of the world. It is a community where "the frontier of death has been breached," where the future is thrown open even for the dead and the lost.⁴⁰ The church of open friendship is, in the last analysis, a *koinonia* of exuberant love.

Moltmann's strong convictions about the church's call to be a *koinonia* of open friendship lead him to emphasize freedom and equality in community and a dynamic openness to the Spirit of God in the way the church structures its life and worship. These emphases are particularly striking in his understanding of Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the offices of the church, and Sabbath worship.

Baptism for Moltmann, is a dynamic act, a bold sign of repentance, and is, in fact, "eschatology put into practice."⁴¹ It means to be equipped by the Holy Spirit for service, to

accept Christ's missionary charge to his followers, to join the fellowship of believers and to die with Christ and to be raised to a new future.⁴² In other words, Baptism is a sign of freedom that has been actualized through faith in God's future. Baptism stands in sharp contrast to structures and ideologies that presuppose resignation and passivity in the face of the status quo. Just as the church should be a contrast community, so ought baptism to be a contrast *sign*—a sign of active freedom in the face of fatalism. This is why, Moltmann believes, infant baptism runs counter to the biblical witness and messianic faith.

Infant baptism draws the eyes of the church to itself—it is a rite of initiation into "Christian society" or even a national church.⁴³ It reflects a dependency mentality about church membership whereby members are not full participants in God's commissioning but are unequal recipients of actions by others.⁴⁴ Infant baptism is a sign of an unconvincing church that is too closely aligned with the status quo of the self-justifying social order.

By contrast, true baptism "points away from itself," just as the *koinonia* of open friendship is turned outward towards God and God's world.⁴⁵ Baptism calls persons into adult faith; it is a commissioning sacrament whereby persons move into active service to the world within the framework of God's history with the world.⁴⁶ It is thus vocational in nature and means that the church must change from being a "religious welfare institution to a social body built upon firm fellowship."⁴⁷

Just as baptism is "the eschatological sign of starting out," so also the Lord's Supper is "the eschatological sign of being or the way."⁴⁸ The Lord's Supper demonstrates and actualizes the same open friendship towards the world made clear in baptism, as well as the radical sense of the equal dignity and freedom of all of God's people. No single class or office of person has the exclusive, or *excluding* right to the administration of the Lord's Supper. "Everyone whom (Christ) calls and who follows his call has the authority to break the bread and dispense the wine."⁴⁹ Any compromise of this authority, that is equally shared by all believers, dilutes the radical gospel message of hope in Jesus Christ—that in Christ God gives God's self for *all* people.

Where baptism is a sign of active friendship with God and God's world, the Lord's Supper is the sign of the openness of such friendship. It is the sacramental foretaste of the "joyful feast" when God's shalorn shall fill all that is.50 It is a feast that prefigures the new creation that overcomes all that is broken in the world, and so it must be a concrete and tangible demonstration of that overcoming by being a feast of the righteous with the unrighteous. It must be a koinonia meal that accepts and justifies tax-collectors and sinners.51 Therefore, since the Lord's Supper is "a sign of fellowship and not of division," it is "not the place to practice church discipline."52 In fact, the inference of Moltmann's argument is that if the church longs, prays, and works for the liberation of the world from sinfulness, then questions of "admissibility" to the Lord's table and of "worthiness" and confession ought to be asked after the sacrament and not before.53 As with Karl Barth, Moltmann's view is that the good news of God's open friendship towards all, righteous or unrighteous, generates and precedes our repentance and not the other way around. "Moral legalism" causes "many people to excommunicate themselves from this meal," when, by contrast, we ought to "start from the Lord's Supper as something done together and openly, and try to explain the moral questions on the basis of this action and this fellowship."54

Not surprisingly, freedom, equality and eschatological openness also characterize

Moltmann's understanding of how the church should discern the gifts of God's people and how their service should be rendered to God and God's world. The baptismal commissioning of every believer is foundational to any understanding of the church's division of labor: all believers are commissioned for service, are given divine gifts for service, and share equal responsibility and status, in community, for bearing "existential witness" to the hope at the core of their existence.55 "Every member of the messianic community is a charismatic," wherever they find themselves.56 "It is not the gift that is important, but its use."57 Moltmann means by this that no function or office within the community of faith has an essential superiority to any other. No authoritarian leverage pertains to one gift nor another. Indeed, to confer superiority on a particular gift or office is to baptize a particular set of existential circumstances and to make a virtue of historical necessities.⁵⁸ All believers are called to exercise their gifts wherever they are and however they can in the service of the new creation, whether they are male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek. But it is most assuredly not the case that their historical circumstances-their "accidental" naturehas superiority or inferiority.59 The church cannot turn historical circumstances or personal aptitudes into an ontological law establishing a religious caste. The community of faith must continually seek to discern the best deployment of its gifts to fulfill the fundamental baptismal commissioning common to all. Thus, no church office or function of ministry is essentially permanent, although the church may discern an individual divine call with de facto but not de jure permanency in particular cases.60

This flexibility about church offices does not originate in utilitarian considerations, although it reflects a keen awareness of the "situatedness" of all discipleship. Rather, Moltmann contends, it comes from the freedom of the Holy Spirit in relation to the particular situation of the community of faith.⁶¹ Openness to God's future necessitates flexibility on the part of the community of faith. God's future is not for an *ideal* world, but for the constantly changing church and world in which we live. Therefore, calcified hierarchies like the monarchical episcopate are not viable options for the messianic community because they foreclose the eschatological openness of God's history with God's geople.⁶² Nevertheless, neither is a democraticized understanding of the distribution of God's gifts justifiable to Moltmann for the same reason. Ultimately, the source for the church's divine gifts and the authority governing their exercise is found in the Trinitarian God. Since community and individuality cannot be set over against each other in the Trinity, neither can this be done with reference to the community of faith. A true understanding of the life in the Spirit of the new *koinonia* affirms equality, freedom, and open friendship among all who participate in the life of love that is the new creation.⁶³

In sabbath worship, the church locates itself with all its pains and joys in the unfolding of the history of the Trinitarian God with the world. The church's worship "is the experience of the qualitative alteration of this world."⁶⁴ Sabbath worship is an experience of freedom. As with the Lord's Supper it prefigures the liberation of the world from the compulsions of work as drudgery and from social conventions that trap like with like. Far from being a necessary but marginal function in life that lubricates the wheels of production and consumption, worship expresses "messianic freedom," not simply a "break" or "day off" from a work-a-day world whose desensitization is perceived as an unalterable fixity.⁶⁶

Worship is how the community of faith opens itself to God, and thus it is "playful," "festal," "exuberant," and "ecstatic."⁶⁷ In worship, the community of faith opens itself to the "Wholly Other" not only as the divine reality at the core of its existence but as the eschatological, "other" way of life that stands in contrast to the often destructive world order. True worship is "open for spontaneous ideas and for accidents coming from outside, for surprises and strangers."⁶⁸ Far from being a manifestation of religion as the opiate of the people, true sabbath worship is an experiment in living now in an eschatological manner. By this means, worship becomes not an *alternative to reality* devoid of this-worldly ethical import, but a liturgical experiment in a practiced, *alternative reality* reflective of God's future.⁶⁹

Thus, in describing the worship and life of the messianic community of faith, Moltmann instantiates the fundamental themes developed in his critique of the closed church and in his explications of true *koinonia*. In this effort he shows remarkable consistency in his passionate devotion to the God whose open friendship with all of creation should and does engender open friendship in the new *koinonia* found in Jesus Christ.

NOTES

 Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 194.

- 2. Cf., Jürgen Moltmann, Passion for Life (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 60ff.
- 3. Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 8.
- 4. Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. xvi.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 327.
- 7. Jürgen Moltmann, The Way of Jesus Christ (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), p. 285.
- 8. Jürgen Moltmann, The Future of Creation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 54.
- 9. Jürgen Moltmann, Hope for the Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 25.
- 10. Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 284-85.
- 11. See Moltmann, Spirit of Life, chap. III.
- 12. Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p. 328.
- 13. Ibid.
- 14. Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 3.
- 15. Ibid., p. 37.
- 16. Ibid., pp. 37-38.
- 17. Ibid., p. 39.
- 18. Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 19.
- 19. Ibid., p. 11.
- 20. Ibid., p. 24.
- 21. Ibid., p. 75.
- 22. Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p. 337.
- 23. Ibid., p. 338.
- 24. Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 37.
- 25. Moltmann, Future of Creation, p. 97.
- 26. Moltmann, God in Creation, pp. 221-75.
- 27. Moltmann, Passion for Life, pp. 41-49.
- 28. Ibid., p. 51.
- 29. Ibid., p. 120.
- 30. Moltmann, Spirit of Life, p. 119.
- 31. Jürgen Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom (San Francisco; Harper and Row, 1981), chap. II.

- 32. Moltmann, Theology of Hope, p. 328.
- 33. See, for example, Moltmann, Spirit of Life, p. 113.
- 34. Moltmann, Hope for the Church, pp. 28-31.
- 35. Ibid.
- Moltmann, Future of Creation, p. 54.
 Ibid, p. 58.
- 38. Moltmann, Hope for the Church, p. 35.
- 39. Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spinit, pp. 110-11; Moltmann, Passion for Life, chap. V.
- 40. Moltmann, Way of Jesus Christ, p. 189.
 41. Moltmann, Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 235.
- 42. Ibid., pp. 236-38.
- 43. Ibid., p. 229.
- 44. Ibid., pp. 230ff.
- 45. Ibid., p. 239.
- 46. Ibid., p. 241.
- 47. Ibid., p. 242.
- 48. Ibid., p. 243.
- 49. Ibid., p. 246.
- 50. Ibid., pp. 252-53.
- 51. Ibid., pp. 248-49.
- 52. Ibid., p. 245.
- 53. Ibid.
- 54. Ibid.
- 55. Ibid., p. 290.
- 56. Ibid., p. 296.
- 57. Ibid., p. 297.
- 58. Ibid., pp. 297, 307.
- 59. Ibid., pp. 296-97.
- 60. Ibid., p. 308.
- 61. Ibid., pp. 306-8.
- 62. Ibid., p. 305.
- 63. Ibid., pp. 305-6.
- 64. Ibid., pp. 261-62.
- 65. Ibid., pp. 265-67.
- 66. Ibid.
- 67. Ibid., pp. 264ff.
- 68. Ibid., p. 273.
- 69. Ibid., pp. 271-72.