***The impact of the ‘liquid church’ discourse in Dutch evangelical churches***

***A practical-theological analysis***

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***Abstract***

This paper considers the current state of the ‘liquid church’ discourse and seeks to relate this to the impact ‘liquid-church’ thinking has in Dutch evangelical churches and circles. The influence of Pete Ward’s book ‘Liquid Church’ (Ward, 2002) has been considerable. Initially it seemed to be a reaction against the more rational and rational-teleological concepts of churchdevelopment (e.g. Purpose Driven Church, Natural Church Development). Looking more carefully at these developments leads to a different direction in which evangelical churchstructures suffer from the same erosion as in other institutional churches. The quest for newer forms of church directs itself in a deeper consideration and theological reflection on ‘shapes of liquid’ and the related ecclesiogical themes. The paper looks at this development from a practical-theological point of view. I will argue that evangelical churches and movements are struggling with the transformation of their heritage into a postmodern climate. A lack of clear and explicit ecclesiological reflection may lure them into various manifestations of ‘liquid church’ and may lead to an increase of ecclesiological pragmatism. In my analysis I make use of Richard R.Osmer’s model of the four tasks of practical theology (Osmer, 2008[[1]](#footnote-1)).

***Four tasks of practical theology***

Richard Osmer introduced in his recent book a helpful way to stimulate practical-theological reflection. He defines four tasks for practical theology. The hermeneutical work practical theology should do consists of four core tasks in their intricate relationship. First of all he discerns a *descriptive-empirical task* starting with the question: what is going on? Within this task we are invited to discern, to collect data and tolook for patterns that may emerge in specific events, situations and contexts. This practical-theological task is informed by different types of research and methodology with the purpose of listening well and postponing judgment. This task is inspired by the *habitus* of priestly listening and a spirituality of presence. Second, Osmer refers to the *interpretive task* focused by the question: why is this going on? After performing well arranged research the practical-theological work of the search for explanations and theories that can explain clarify specific conditions is necessary. The researcher looks for theories that can reframe the researched context and data. This implies the ability to test theories on the basis of adequate rules and validation procedures. Third, the practical theologian should perform the *normative task* by answering the question: what should be going on? In order to enable us to interpret events, situations and patters we need a normative frame of reference, theological and ethical theories. Prophetic discernment is here at stake as an important *habitus*. Finally, and fourth, Osmer defines the *pragmatic task:* how should we react? This task focuses on the conditions needed to reformulate an improved practice and should be inspired by serving leadership. I will now use these four tasks to sequence my line of thinking in this paper.

***What is going on - interest in practice – implicit and disbalanced ecclesiology***

Church practice and the development of a missionary church is ‘hot’ high on the agenda of mainline evangelical churches in the Netherlands. Publications with direct or indirect links to this theme are numerous, both in churchnewsmagazines and in more popular theological journals[[2]](#footnote-2). A quick internet survey shows thousands of hits on both terms as ‘churchgrowth’, ‘churchdevelopment’ and ‘churchplanting’. Both churches and evangelical organizations (e.g. Evangelical Alliance, Evangelical Broadcasting Organization) show great interest, for various reasons but as it seems with one goal: the search for the development of missionary churches, churches that mediate the gospel to a post-christian nation, caught in economic and political turmoil after recent elections. Most of the attempts breathe very positive attitudes towards the possibilities of developing new churches with new forms as well. Within evangelical churches and networks a variety of experiments with ecclesial forms pass by with characteristics implying familiarity with liquid church thinking (Erwich, 2008; Ward, 2003,2008)[[3]](#footnote-3). ‘ Liquid’ church is in contrast with ‘ solid church’. Within the ‘solid’ paradigm the emphasis is on formal growth and influence in the local community, rules and regulations are of great importance, there are fixed patterns of leadership and authority. Within the ‘liquid’ paradigm the focus is not on formal institutional business but on the informal ‘flowing’ communication between believers. The ‘liquid’ community consists of networks of believers and is geared towards spiritual activities. The related community must not necessarily have the form of a weekly worship on Sundays but may have the form of a decentral network of spiritual exercises[[4]](#footnote-4).

By means of illustration I present three examples of familiarity with ‘liquid church’ thinking as help on our way to answer our first question, *what is going on?* I am sympathetic with the following initiatives and it is by no means my attempt to disqualify the work of the mentioned workers.

The first example comes from a Dutch evangelical community called Elim, a platform for base-communities with an evangelical orientation. Elim has a set of activities, varying from worshipmeetings to supporting international diaconal projects in Asia[[5]](#footnote-5). The website shows the development through the years and give interesting insights in some theological lines of thinking and specifically with regard to ‘Liquid church’[[6]](#footnote-6). The site is affirmative to the questions that are raised by Pete Ward and the author of the text connects, rather uncritically, Ward’s assumptions with their community situation. According to the author their way of community life and outreach are what Ward intended. Fluidity is one of the characteristics and at the same time he claims the necessity of ‘solid’ as the community develops through the years. He moves in his text between the ‘safe frame of tradition’ and ‘flexible vulnerability’ of a ‘fluid organization(!)’. He finalizes his essay with the following sentences (translation RE):

*‘We must not lock the gold of the tradition behind the safe churchwalls where inflation devalues it. It is the time to purify the gold of tradition of its contamination by melting it. Once it is fluid, we may use it in a changing society. Only if we keep the gold of tradition warm by mutual love and gifts and fruits of the Spirit, to prevent it from solidifying, we can keep growing.....communities do not solidify! Keep the 2000 year old principles of Acts 2 liquid in Jesus name!’*

This is an intriguing quote and full of play of metaphor. The gold of the tradition? What is meant by this? And: how to melt this gold and what should be taken out of it in order to purify it? The essay betrays the struggle between traditional ways of being church and the more experimental way this community has existed so far in time. It shows a kind of being caught in the middle between (if I may use this terminology) ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’.

The second example I have taken from a public lecture with the Dutch title *‘De vloeibare kerk. Kies een kerk – geen kerk’*, by Matthijs Vlaardingerbroek given at the *Youth for Christ* Flevo Festival in August 2006[[7]](#footnote-7). Vlaardingerbroek, himself a devoted pioneer of alternative forms of church and mainly inspired by churchplanter Stuart Murray, admits that many people do no longer fit in the traditional churches. He predicts that in the coming years the number of people who seek for alternative ways of being and belonging to church will increase. In his analysis he takes for granted the post-christendom thesis of Stuart Murray with a strong negative judgment of the events that led to the merger of state and church in the fourth century known als the ‘Constantinian turn’. The church, according to Vlaardinger-broek should be ‘searching, finding and following of Christ and his Kingdom’. As a conse-quence older forms of church are full of risks if they do not get beyond meetings and drinking coffee. In his attempt to formulate newer forms of church he turns the term church into a verb: we church, you church etc. He is cautious and warns people not to leave their own church where they can grow too soon but he concludes:

*‘Where people are members of different networks, in which they search, find and follow Jesus and his Kingdom, where they are members of groups strong in worship, mission and community, there is what Pete Ward calls ‘liquid church’’.*

Again, I appreciate this work but questions also arise: to what extent is the interpretation of the ‘Constantinian turn’ not an overinterpretation based on a specific and shallow reading of historical data? And: how does community really take shape in these various networks people are members of? There is no longterm empirical evidence that pioneer situations will not undergo similar institutional crises as their ‘solid’ predecessors experienced. It seems again a to quick affirmation of the liquid theses.

My third and final example relates to my own Baptist church context. Within the Baptist churches of the Dutch Baptist Union the debate about the relationship between baptism and membership has emerged in the last ten years. Various churches notice a growing influx of believers from more institutional churches (mainly from a reformed background). Most of the time people choose a Baptist church because of the middle position the churches take between the more charismatic and reformed churches. Classically membership is linked to baptism, only those baptized (through immersion) are members. In the baptismal service the believer becomes a member through the baptism performed. This has been much in debate in the last years as many other evangelical churches have adopted the same form of baptism. Baptists felt they were no longer unique with the emphasis on this identity marker and it led to reflection on the relationship between baptism and membership in many churches. The discussion was strongly influenced by elements of the ‘liquid church’ discourse. Baptists were very much concerned with the visibility of the local church and her believers. They struggle with the idea that in fact commodification leads to more spiritual fluidity. In the ‘liquid’ discourse believers are seen more as consumers who being part of several networks travel and ‘shop’ for meaning and spirituality without a commitment in terms of formal membership. According to Ward the liquid community should gather herself around spiritual consumers[[8]](#footnote-8). This forces Baptist communities to reconsider their ecclesiology and the way they think and act concerning membership and baptism. The ‘centered set’ option as a possible way forward with membership divided into core members and those who are moving in the direction of Christ (without formal membership) is in fact close to accepting the liquid church thesis at least partially (Erwich, 2008).

I come to a conclusion concerning the first part of my presentation. *What is going on?* I collect my findings and observations so far.

There seems to be a fair struggle concerning the form of churches, both in terms of content and structures. The ‘liquid discourse’ infused and stimulated reflection on these themes and impacted the clash between ‘traditional church’ and newer forms of church. At the same time there is much insecurity as to the direction churches have to take, concerning identity principles. Striking are either implicit ecclesiologal assumptions or shallow ecclesiological thinking related to the current shifts.

***Why is this going on – unresolved tensions and heritage & theology and culture issues***

We now come to our second practical-theological task, an attempt to find adequate clarifications of our questions. Several issues are at stake. Let me start with a brief analysis of the church in evangelical theology. It is no secret that evangelicalism lacks a well founded ecclesiology. I agree with van Dyk (Van Dyk, 2007) that the historical foundations of evangelicalism have contributed to this. The development of the movement characterized itself by disillusionment with church structures, anti-institutional tendencies and strong emphases on personal (inner) experiences. Very often individual choices (if people disagree with certain practices in churches) are presented as solutions (leaving and changing the church) to ecclesial problems. It has been attested more than once that evangelicals are very sensitive to the surrounding culture and have surrendered too easily to modernity and its ‘benefits’. While some speak of the betrayal of evangelical core values using ‘market tools’., others are more nuanced in their critique and talk about ‘marginalized ecclesiology’ (Van Dyk, 2007). Several solutions have been proposed, varying from taking up the ‘right doctrine’ to reframing and relating the original heritage to the current culture in a more valid way[[9]](#footnote-9). Fair enough, this brief analysis shows that the evangelical heritage apparently runs behind and has not been adequately retransformed for the current culture[[10]](#footnote-10). At the same time the perception of culture itself is an important factor in defining a valid ecclesiology in whatever direction. In fact the unresolved theological issues and a tensionfilled relation with culture lures evangelical churches into experiments with ‘liquid’ with the effect of sliding into all kinds of pragmatism.

This brings us to a second point, related to this first one. It seems that as a consequence of a clear ecclesiological reflection church practices becomes gradually ‘the one and only thing churches need’. The separation of practice and norms puts valid growth (both in quality of faith and in number of believers) of the church at risk. I have once and again pointed to this problem in the context of congregational development (Erwich, 2005). Churchmodels and newer approaches of churchdevelopment are implemented with good intentions but with hardly any reflection as to the match with content and church theology of the local church. Healy has in a what different perspective pointed to this same fact (Healy, 2003):

‘Over the last decade or so there have been signs of a shift away from the highly systematic and ideal ecclesiologies of the twentieth century, those described, for example, in Avery Dulles’s classic study, *Models of the Church*. Increasingly, theologians have turned their attention to the concrete church, to its activities and distinctive functions’.

Practices of the church are the focus of what Healy calls the ‘new ecclesiology’. Healy notices a lack of definition of practice. What is practice and how is it used? Practices are not right by itself and need to be tested and normative data, ecclesiology, pneumatology plays an important role in this testing. Ecclesiology seems highly related to the doctrine of God and this part of theological reflection cannot be omitted in this discourse. And this is exactly, in addition to my earlier point, the case. There is a need for more balanced ecclesiological reflection, taking practice and (constructed) norms into account. Recently I was engaged with students in a course on ecclesiology and teasing them a bit I started: ‘Tell me about your concept of God and I will tell you what concept of the church you have…!’

***What should be going on - ecclesiological balance & informed critical dialogue***

We do need wisdom to cope with the current situation. My presentation is not a quick-fix route to success. All serious participants are aware of the difficulties. In search for a normative direction for evangelical churches it seems to me there are a number of reflections I would like to make[[11]](#footnote-11). For our purpose I would like to underline the importance of *ecclesiological balance*. By this I mean several things.

For a start I am strongly convinced that we need to be willing to learn from newer move-ments such as the emergent church, including an indepth review of historical traditions on liturgy, worship and sacraments. The good practices that have been developed in this movement are vital to further learning experiences. This involves as well the willingness to use (early) churchtradition as a valid source next to Scripture as unifying norm.

Secondly, we will need a more indepth dialogue concerning the relationship between theology, culture and church. There are two important issues I am more than concerned about. One is the extent to which churches are able to consider the positive value of perceiving themselves on a continuum between ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’. Doing this would enable them to use the two needed sides of the ‘ecclesial coin’. In fact I agree with de Groot (De Groot, 2008) who contests that ‘liquid’ and ‘solid’ religion are entangled in an ongoing interplay. There is no clear separation line between these two and more examples could illustrate this easily (De Groot, 2008[[12]](#footnote-12)). Liquid and solid manifestations of church live as inseparable twins, with possiby same genetic codes but with different outlook and manifestations. De Groot: ‘It is not sociologically inevitable that this liquid church will mix with other religious traditions and vanish as something unidentiable, unless there is a solid church that supports it?’[[13]](#footnote-13).

The other concern is the lack of reflection on the relationship between church and predominant culture. As De Groot has shown in his analysis of Bauman (De Groot, 2006[[14]](#footnote-14)), Bauman’s social theory can be helpful in analyzing the church’s stance in society and hence help the reformulation of the mission of the church. Evangelical churches would benefit from a more critical analysis of the cultural climate with its growing insecurity, inequality etc. Developing a more *diaconal* theology would balance onesided soteriological thinking.

I do present this here as a *norm* under the heading of this third practical-theological task. Without profound rethinking of these aspects mentioned I am afraid many young churches of whatever form will not survive.

***How should we react – empirical research & reformulation of core values***

What should we do? In the end it is about improving practice and generating new(er) strategies. In my view a new practice entails (at least) the following.

1. More longterm empirical research in evangelical churches in which ‘grassroot ecclesiology’ can be developed and monitored over a number of years.
2. Stimulating studygroups in churches and outside churches concerning faith, theology and culture.
3. Reformulating the evangelical heritage linked with the mentioned longterm empirical research (increasing congregational studies).
4. Encouraging guided experiments with alternative forms of church combined with creating platforms to evaluate these.
5. Groups of theologians and churchleaders who are committed to these tasks together for the sake of the churches.

These are only a few modest attempts to keep the discourse going and to improve the quality of the practices of the churches we serve. Much depends in terms of research on the willingness of local churches to participate and their openness to learning. In my experience this is hard work, but worthwil as they experience working with more joy and effect after elements of practice have been improved.

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1. R.R.Osmer, *Practical Theology. An Introduction.* (Grand Rapids, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. a more popular evangelical-theological journal with the name *Soteria*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Even outside evangelical circles Ward receives quite some attention and in the same context of theological reflection concerning th church. Cf. <http://www.peternissen.nl/lezingen/lezingen-in-2009/55-kerk-in-limburg-na-de-vanzelfsprekendheid.html> (June 19, 2010): ‘Als we de kerk in Limburg een nieuwe toekomst gunnen, voorbij de vanzelfsprekendheid, dan moeten we bereid zijn haar opnieuw geboren te laten worden. En daarvoor moeten we het oude achter ons willen laten; dan moeten we durven wegtrekken uit het huis van farao, weg van de vleespotten van Egypte. De Britse theoloog Stuart Murray vergelijkt het verlaten van de christenheid en van de klassieke volkskerk met het verlaten van een grote oceaanstomer als de Titanic. Mensen doen dat niet graag. Liever gaan ze, terwijl ze weten dat het schip zinkt, de ligstoelen op het dek nog eens een keer verzetten in plaats van de schijnbare veiligheid van het grote stoomschip in te ruilen voor de onzekerheid van een klein bootje. Die nieuwe, vloeibare kerkelijke gemeenschappen van de toekomst zullen inderdaad geen grote oceaanstomers zijn, geen wereldkerk dus, maar eerder een wankel roeibootje. Die gemeenschappen zullen niet groot zijn en zij zullen weinig macht en prestige hebben. Ze kunnen niet rekenen op privileges en vanzelfsprekendheden. Zij morrelen in de marge van samenleving en cultuur, zonder veel institutionele bagage en zonder veel status. Zij zijn meer beweging dan institutie. Maar zij staan open voor het waaien van de Geest, de Geest van Pinksteren, die hen vooruit drijft, tot voorbij de vanzelfsprekendheid’. Cf. also <http://www.dsts.nl/Zondervan_lezing.html> (June 19, 2010): ‘Een interessante poging tot zo’n kritische correlatie is die van de evangelische theoloog Pete Ward. In zijn boek Liquid Church werkt hij onder andere Castells’ sociologische theorie over de netwerksamenleving ecclesiologisch uit tot een theorie over een flexibele, vloeibare, kerk9. Een kernprobleem van dit boek is het volgende: geen enkele structuur kan geheel vloeibaar zijn. Metaforisch gesproken bevindt elke vloeistof zich in een vat, in een ruimte die de vloeistof begrenst. Wat is dan het vat waarin de vloeibare kerk zich beweegt? Wards antwoord is dat de 'individuen en groepen waaruit de netwerken van een vloeibare kerk bestaan, zichzelf moeten begrenzen door een orthodoxie te omarmen die is geworteld in de geloofsbelijdenissen en traditie van de kerk.' Ik vraag me af of op deze manier de kritische correlatie van traditie en eigentijdse ervaring wel op de juiste manier gebeurt. De relevantie van de geloofsbelijdenissen en traditie van de kerk kan niet voorondersteld worden, maar moet kritisch onderzocht worden. Wards antwoord negeert een gegeven dat cruciaal is voor de groep mensen die ik op het oog heb. Immers, jezelf laten begrenzen door een kerkelijke orthodoxie veronderstelt een vertrouwen in en bekendheid met de kerk en haar traditie. En dat laatste ontbreekt nu juist bij deze jongeren. Voor hen is de kerk niet meer de vanzelfsprekende plek om Gods nabijheid te zoeken. Voor hen heeft de kerk, haar taal en gebruiken, grotendeels haar plausibiliteit verloren. Zij leven in een sociaal-culturele werkelijkheid waarin religie op een nieuwe manier plausibel wordt en sociaal vorm krijgt. En dat is mogelijk niet zichtbaar te maken vanuit orthodoxe opvattingen. Traditie en eigentijdse ervaring moeten dus anders met elkaar in contact gebracht worden’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more detailed characteristics see P.Ward, *Liquid Church. A bold vision of how to be God’s people in worship and mission – a flexible, fluid way of being church.* (Carlisle, 2002) and P.Ward, *Participation and Mediation. A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church.* (London, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.elim.nl> (June 19, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.elim.nl/nl/lifestylevloeibare-kerk.html> (June 19, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M.Vlaardingerbroek, *De vloeibare kerk. Kies een kerk – geen kerk.* (2006). Access through <http://www.stadopeenberg.nl/html/downloads/vloeibarekerk.pdf> (June 19, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ward, *Participation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. M.Volf, *After Our Likeness.* (Grand Rapids, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Corey E. Labanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church.*(Farnham, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Generally I agree with the proposal Van Dyk gives. Evangelical ecclesiology should be of incarnational, trinitarian, sacramental, proclamatory and eschatological nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. C.N.de Groot, *Three Types of Liquid Religion.* In: *Implicit Religion* (2008). Pp.277-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. C.N.de Groot, *The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of a Liquid Church.* In: International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church. Vol.6,1 (2006). Pp.91-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. C.N.de Groot, *The Church in Liquid Modernity: A Sociological and Theological Exploration of a Liquid Church.* In: International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church. Vol.6,1 (2006). Pp.91-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)