



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

The Church Theology and Resources

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The Church—Theology and Resources

ECO Theology Series

Standing Theology Committee

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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”
— Romans 12:2

“Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.” (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church’s history. Christianity is moving from its historical centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled, to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus’s time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high middle ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation, and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

Ecclesiology Introduction

Ecclesiology is the study of the church. What is the church? What qualifies as a church? What are the theological bases of the church? What is the church for? These, and many more are the questions that form the field of ecclesiology. The COVID-19 pandemic, combined with rapid cultural shifts, have brought many questions of the church to the forefront.

This book offers resources to enable you and your congregation to ask big questions about the church so that you can faithfully fulfill God's mission for you in your context. This book does not lay out official ECO polity on the church, which can be found in ECO's Constitution.

In places, this book offers theological bases for ideas for the future which may not be reflected in ECO's current Constitution. The institutions that make up the Church have changed over history and we anticipate their need for future changes. It is our hope that the theological reflections in this book can help keep these conversations grounded in Scripture and our Reformed theological heritage where it has been faithful to Scripture.

Part I: Theological Foundations

What is the Church: A Biblical Perspective

Rev. Dr. Mark Patterson

Introduction

What is the church? It is a vital question, on many levels and for numerous reasons. Arguably the answer has never been less clear or agreed upon in western culture than today. And this is true for both those inside and those outside of the church. The fact that we now live—and have lived for several decades—in a post-Christian culture is undeniable. This unprecedented reality has had profound effect on how the church is perceived. On the one side of the equation, is a culture that is unimpressed with the church, its beliefs, and what it claims to offer. In the eyes of many—and the numbers are growing—the church is, at best, archaic, irrelevant, and unnecessary. At worst, the church is seen as harmful to society, as it is perceived as judgmental, bigoted, unscientific, and seeking political power that would shape culture in its image. From the side of the secular world the church has little (nothing?) good to offer for the bettering of society and much to harm it.

On the other side of the equation, we see confusion within the church itself as it wrestles to determine its purpose and work and its response to the challenges before it. The church in America today is a struggling church, a church wavering in its faith, uncertain of its ethic, divided in its fellowship, distracted from its purpose, and anemic in its witness. In a post-Christian environment, it becomes ever more difficult to maintain Christian distinctives, as the church increasingly reels under (and is increasingly shaped by) the forces of secularism. This has had a variety of effects: some churches rise to aggressively take on secularism, often (ironically!) uniting with or relying upon the secular government to restore Christian values and ethics. Other churches take the opposite approach, becoming increasingly timid and reclusive. Still others acquiesce, accepting the values and tasks set by culture without apology or shame. But in all this, the nature and purpose of the church becomes more and more uncertain not only to the larger culture but the church itself.

Nearly two years of life under pandemic restrictions have only made the state of the church more difficult and confusing. Meeting online has brought unprecedented outreach and participation as people are able to simply “click” and join a worship service. Many churches are seeing more “attending” their services than ever before. Participation has never been easier. Never have outsiders been offered a simpler or less demanding way to “join” the church. Yet this is not without questions or problems. Many of these online “attendees” are those who once physically participated in the corporate worship and larger life of the church but now find it easier, more enjoyable, relaxed, etc. to watch online. Even as some churches see new participants online most churches are seeing their lowest attendance in live worship. What is the church in this context? Is “online church” really the church? Is it possible to be the church and part of the larger church if one remains physically isolated from most or all others in the body? If so, how might the online church be cared for, disciplined, and sent out in mission? And if none of these happen in a person’s life, regardless of how often they attend an online service, may we rightly (i.e. from

Scripture, theology, and polity) see them as part of the church? Countless other questions remain and burst from all this. But in them all and over them all is the one overriding question: what, exactly, is the church? The shape, mission, and effectiveness in the coming decades will be shaped more by how we answer this question than perhaps any other before us.

While it is a question far beyond the scope of any one paper (or even stack of them) it is my intent to give some answer to this question by looking at Scripture's teaching on the nature, call, and work of the church. This will be done by looking first at the meaning and use of the word church (*ekklēsia*) in the New Testament and drawing from this some foundational theological perspectives. In the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions we turn first to Scripture and then to theological reflection to provide answers to our questions. So it is here.

The First Word: *Ekklēsia*

The answer to the question, "What is the church?" begins not by turning to descriptions of its attributes or work or even its history, but to understanding the act by which it exists. The New Testament word for church, a noun, is built around a verb describing not acts or attributes but the assembly-creating summons which calls it into existence. The word church in the New Testament, *ekklēsia*, is wrapped around the word *kaleo*, meaning, "call" or "summons." Before the church is anything else, before its attributes or actions are described, it is known first as a collection of people who have been "called" together by another. While this word may be used of secular gatherings which have been summoned, its dominant use in the New Testament refers to a unique body called together and set apart by the testimony of Jesus through the Spirit. The church, first and foremost, is a collection of people called together by the word of Jesus.¹

Evidently, the word for church is comprised of two words.² Attached to the main word "call" or "summon" is the preposition "out of" (*ek*). From this it has been popularly and broadly noted that the church consists not only of a people who have been called by God but more specifically a people *called out* of the world for his use. While popular and even plausible, this understanding should not be emphasized, for three reasons: first the contexts where the word "church" (*ekklēsia*) is used in the New Testament include no reference or allusion to the action of people being "called out" from something else. The term seems to simply mean a genuine and rightly constituted assembly of persons. Second, the verbal form which describes the action of a literal "calling out" is never connected in Scripture with the noun, "church." Third, and perhaps most important, the focus of the word "church" is on the one calling it into existence and his purpose for it, not that from which it came. While it is true that the church is called out of the world and its idolatry and immorality the focus lies not on what has been left behind but the One before whom it has been gathered. The church is an assembly of people whose full attention has turned away from the past to focus alone upon the one who has called them to himself.

What is the church? While the answer to this is multifaceted and includes various details, the answer begins with this act and centers on the One who sovereignly and graciously enacted it.

¹ Romans 1:6–7; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 9; Ephesians 2:11ff; Colossians 3:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; 2 Timothy 1:9.

² New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. II, p. 134.

While the word “church” occurs about 115 times in the New Testament only two of these are found in the Gospels, both in Matthew.³ Aside from these two uses the early church seemed reluctant to use the term to describe gatherings of disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus and limited it to those gatherings that came into existence following his death and resurrection. Thus, while Luke never uses the word in his gospel narrative, nearly a fifth of its New Testament uses are found in his history of the church, Acts. The word church, therefore, does not mean a simple assembly of disciples who gather to hear his teaching, be healed, eat with sinners and tax collectors, or even around the table for the Last Supper. The church is more than an earthly gathering, even an earthly gathering around Jesus. The church is an assembly of people whom the Risen and Glorified Lord has called to himself making them participants in his death and resurrection who now live in his presence. From this we gain ever more specific insights into the nature and purpose of the church. The continuing and now expanding ministry of the risen Jesus is now unfolding in the life and witness of the church which is his body. What Jesus began to do is described in Luke but what Jesus continues to do is now through his church and is described in Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

Paul and the Church

Nearly sixty percent of the New Testament’s use of *ekklēsia* occur in the writings of Paul. As a witness to the resurrection and apostle to the church Paul provides specific descriptions of what the church was called to be, made to be, and must strive to be. Unsurprisingly, these take on a breadth of emphasis across the various letters to different churches. But it is by reflecting on these we are able to discern most clearly God’s intent for the church he summoned into existence and called into his presence.

The starting point of all Paul understands and says about the church begins with the proclamation of Christ. The word of Jesus, through the preaching of the church and in the power of the Holy Spirit, calls the lost and sinful into a new life.⁴ It is by him and by his Word that the church is summoned and gathered. Their reception of this word and their belief that it is truly God’s living word summoning them to reconciliation and fellowship, brings them into the presence of Jesus and into the assembly of all whom he has called to himself. Through this call God delivers his people from the “domain of darkness,” and transfers them “to the Kingdom of the Son he loves.”⁵ The church exists by the power of the Lord’s sovereign, personal, electing call. Therefore, Paul, at times, simply uses “the called” to describe this new community of God.⁶

The effects of this call are far reaching:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through

³ Matthew 16:18, 18:17.

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2:13; cf. Isaiah 55:11.

⁵ Colossians 1:13.

⁶ e.g. Romans 1:6–7; 8:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2.

us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.⁷

Paul describes God's call as utterly transformative, in three ways. First the person is made new. All that belonged to the past has transformed as the old is made new. Second, this call announces reconciliation and thus a new relationship with God. By God's own act, in and through Christ Jesus, God was reconciling the world to himself. This act continues and becomes effectively real in the new relationship given and established in the Word of Christ. Finally, there is given a new vocation. Those made new and brought into a new reconciliation are now given a new message. This message is nothing less than the word of Christ itself, the proclamation that God was indeed in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Those who have experienced the reality of new creation, those who now know the living presence of Christ in new relationship, are sent out as ambassadors and witnesses to its truth and reality. And in their witness, through the Spirit, the word of Christ moves ever forward calling yet more into this new life, new relationship, and new vocation.

For Paul, the church's entire existence was found in God and the church's ongoing life was to be understood completely in terms of its relationship with the Lord. Thus, Paul's most elemental description of the church is "the congregation (*ekklēsia*) of God."⁸ All this is easily summarized: by the act of God an assembly of people were summoned and, in this call, and their response of faith they are brought into a new and future reality which was to shape and define the whole of their lives.

What is the church? It is nothing less than the God-made assembly comprised of all those whom he has called to himself. It is nothing less than the eternity-shaped community living in this time yet in relationship with the risen, glorified, and eternal Lord. It is nothing less than fellowship of those whom God reconciled to himself (and thus to one another!) and made witnesses and ambassadors of this new reality. It is nothing less than a recreated people belonging wholly to another king and living in this world as ambassadors of the one coming one day to reign over a new heavens and earth.

That this may seem less than real or hardly evident does not change these facts. All that Paul describes are ultimately eschatological realities. It is about a different world breaking in to this one, a future and eternal reality entering our time. This new reality does not begin complete or fully accomplished but awaits a future consummation when the One whose Word initiated this reality returns to fulfill and complete all his work. But what the word of Christ has accomplished and created is thoroughly real and thus capable of being known and experienced, in our time, in our congregations and in our lives. We may truly know forgiveness, experience rebirth and transformation, and enter a new and real relationship with God. We may know victory over sin, see prayers answered, and walk in a genuine newness of life. But these realities are known only in their nascence. And we know these eternal realities within a temporal reality that not only opaquely their vibrancy but strives to extinguish them. Thus, there is in this, from its initial call to its ultimate fulfillment, a continual call to faith. The summons to trust and believe this new reality does not end with the initial call but continues through the whole of this new life. This new life is

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, ESV.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:2, 11:16, 22; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4.

entered by a response of faith to the living word of Christ. And it is continued by the same. Amid the noise and pull of this fallen world “the called” are called again and again to hear Jesus’ summons to community and respond to it by turning from the old and allowing the new that has been given, the new that is most real, to increasingly be the defining reality over the whole of their lives.

It is from this that we understand how Paul might answer the question, what is the church? Paul understood the church in terms of both present and future realities, in terms of initiated reality and coming fulfillment. And the whole of his understanding of the church was that of seeing the life and mission of the church as unfolding between these two realities.

Paul described the new life given and made known to the church in vibrant terms. The work that God had done in Christ was as real and knowable even as it was beyond comprehension. Thus Paul could say that God had made known the mystery of his will⁹ and still pray for the church to grasp the fulness of all God has done.¹⁰ Paul sought to describe this new reality in terms that were concretely real while yet fully expectant of future fulfillment. Paul declares, “we are God’s workmanship, those created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand in order that we might walk in them”¹¹ voicing both certainty of God’s past work and the future unfolding of its realities and goals in the lives of those whom he has called.

But it goes far deeper than this.

Paul calls the church to lift their understanding above that which is around them, that which is of this age and “think of those things that are above and not the things earth, for you have died and your life has been concealed with Christ in God.”¹² Here Paul describes in uncompromising terms that “the called” now exist in a new reality. But this must not be misunderstood. While this reality brings them new life it is a life that is hidden “with Christ in God.” The fulness of this new life awaits a future unveiling and fulfillment. For “when Christ who is our life is revealed, you also shall be revealed with him in glory.” But this temporal fulfillment, the church’s experience of the new realities promised and given are also “in Christ” in whom our lives are hidden. This new life, the promise of victory over sin, the life in the Spirit and the fruit and gifts that spill from it, are never made our possessions. We do not own or control them. The Christian life is not one of learning how to make all these “work” in life or how to “do” this new life (Galatians 3:3!) but of learning to rest in God’s work. The Christian life is one of believing what God has done and given us in Christ and learning to *sit* in this.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.¹³

A more succinct and beautiful description would be hard to find. God, from the goodness of his nature, turns to those beyond all help or aid and makes them alive *in Christ*. This is not an

⁹ Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁰ Ephesians 1:15–23, 3:14–21; Colossians 1:9.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:10, translation mine.

¹² Colossians 3:3, translation mine.

¹³ Ephesians 2:4–7, ESV.

offer but an act, not a potential reality but one fully accomplished. At no point is it dependent upon our labour to complete what has begun or fulfill something lacking. From start to finish it is an act of pure grace, from the summons to a new life lived among a new community to the life that unfolds in this community as it lives in Christ. By grace God has raised us up *with Christ* and seated us together *with Christ*. All that unfolds in the Christian life—just as all that follows in Ephesians—builds upon the fact of our being called (Ephesians ch. 1) by God and thus, raised and seated with him (2:2a) in these realities is created a single new person, in Christ, united in Christ, and living in Christ who is our peace, making separated one (2:2b).

This “with him” is vital to understanding the Christian life and therefore, the church. Ephesians 2 is a carefully written unit made of two parts which mirror one another. The first provides a powerful description of salvation by grace and the second describes the unity former enemies—Jews and Gentiles—now have because of this act. In each half are three separate “movements” mirroring one another but each with a different content. In 2:1–10 these three movements express 1) the problem of sin so profound it has brought spiritual death; 2) the solution found in Christ in whom we have been made alive as a free gift; and 3) the consequences of this new creation as we are raised and seated in Christ. The second half of the chapter reflects these, starting with 1) the problem of separation between Jews and Gentiles (2:11–12); 2) the solution found in Christ who is our peace (2:13–18) uniting us to one another in himself; and 3) the consequence of this in the making of a new united people, a new household of God (2:19–22). All this takes place *in him* and becomes ours only when we are “with him.” In this union we are not only reconciled to God and made new, but this “with him” expands to new life “with one another.” Former enemies, having been made alive together with Christ, raised with Christ, and seated with Christ now have in him a new citizenship with one another (2:19), a new unity as they are joined with one another (2:21), and a new family.

Conclusion: What is the Church?

It is natural for us, when seeking to answer this question, to turn first and most often to the church’s characteristics, mission, attributes, or actions. One might turn to history and describe what the church has been and done, both good and bad, to discern there what the church is. One might raise the classically understood attributes, “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” to describe the real nature of the church. One might look at its work and mission, in all its various manifestations across time.

Yet for all the insights these might provide, despite how true any might be, the church must first and foremost be defined not by its nature or works but by its relationships. More specifically, by three relationships.

First, and above all else, the church is defined by its relationship with the resurrected Lord Jesus who has summoned it into existence. As such, it exists as a resurrection people, a people touched and transformed by God’s eternal kingdom transformed in time by that which lays completely outside it. The church is a people who are in Christ acknowledging that in him is alone is life.

Second, the church is defined by relationships among its members that reflect and reveal this new life. In an age in which the church has, arguably, never been more divided it is vital to

remember that before and despite our differences we together comprise the one church. What Jesus accomplished and what is available to us who live in him is fully able to tear down again every wall that divides and create one people of God. To truly live in Christ is to live in pursuit of this reality.

Third, the church is defined by the Christlike, Christ-shaped relationships it brings to those outside its fellowship. Bonhoeffer once said, "the church is the only institution that exists primarily for the needs of those who are not its members." Amid our increasingly secular culture the church too often chooses to stifle its message and shape their voice and work around the values and expectations of the culture. Or, conversely, the church cloisters itself behind walls thick and high that protect the faithful from the ungodly on the other side. Both approaches, however, represent damaged relationships with both God and the people he calls us to reach. The church is called to go out into the world, in the image of Jesus. The church goes to serve, love, forgive, and heal. And it goes as God's ambassadors announcing and demonstrating a different reality.

What is the church? It is, like all humanity, fallen, broken, and sinful. But it is also a community where these realities are being transformed into something new, healed, and reconciled. It is a community where the effects and damage of sin have begun to fade and lose their hold. It is neither a perfect people nor finished work but rather a people who are in the process of being transformed from what was to what is coming. Experiencing this transformation, in knowing the real presence of the resurrected Jesus, the church becomes the witness and manifestation of this reality. And in this witness Jesus continues his work of summoning people to himself and beginning the process in them of transforming them into a people prepared for his coming kingdom. This is the church.

The Church: One, Holy, and Catholic

Rev. Dr. Laura Smit

This chapter describes traditional "marks" of the church taken from the Apostles' Creed (the Nicene adds "apostolic") as they bear on the major question of denominationalism and division.

The Church is One

Throughout my life I've been part of congregations that enjoy celebrating Reformation Day, and I have always joined in the celebrative spirit. Yet I have frequently encountered people who find such celebration to be at best in bad taste and at worst a sign of a fundamental misunderstanding about the importance of Christian unity. I am not surprised when my Roman Catholic friends react this way to congregations that celebrate the Reformation, but I am surprised when Protestants join the protest. Specifically, I am puzzled by Protestants who have every intention of remaining Protestant but who still talk as though the Reformation was a tragedy. They seem to think that we're allowed to be Protestant, but are supposed to be sad about it, or perhaps even feel guilty about it. The most melodramatic accusation (one I've heard often) is that "a divided church is a slap in the face of God," and "divided" always seems to mean institutionally divided. I would have more sympathy with the claim that a denomination or congregation that is theologically divided or that is divided over significant moral issues is disrespecting God, and I certainly have sympathy with the idea that the presence within the global church of heterodox theology and innovative, non-Biblical moral teaching is disrespecting God. But in what way is it disrespectful for different sorts of churches to exist, having different forms of government, different styles of worship, and different cultural expressions? What Biblical teaching would lead us to expect that all Christians everywhere in the world and at every time in history would share the same institutional expression?

There have been times and places in the history of Christianity when the Church was understood primarily as an institution, and in those times and places any deviation from that institution has been spoken of as identical with defection from the true Church. However, that way of thinking about the Church has no support that I can see in the New Testament and has never been the only or even the dominant way of understanding the Church's identity historically. It is certainly not an understanding of the Church that makes sense within Protestantism. The classic book about this is called *Models of the Church*,¹ written by Avery Dulles, a Roman Catholic theologian. The first model that Dulles considers is this institutional model, and – even though almost all of its defenders throughout history have been Roman Catholics – it's the only model that Dulles firmly rejects. He acknowledges that naturally there is an institutional aspect to churches, but that aspect is not what defines the church. Dulles is much more invested in models of the Church that concentrate on the relationship between the community of Christians and the person of Jesus, in that the unity of the Church is found in Jesus Himself. Just as a university needs to have some institutional structures to function, so does a church; but the university is

¹ Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*, (Doubleday, 2002).

not in its essence an institutional structure, and neither is the church. The essence of a university is education; the essence of the church is union with Christ. If a university becomes nothing other than an institution, it has lost its reason for being, and the same would be true of the Church. Union with Christ can be understood in a variety of ways, and Dulles suggests several models that approach union with Christ from different vantage points.

The idea that union with Christ is the essence of the unity of the Church is supported by the most-cited Scripture passage regarding Christian unity: John 17, where Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, even as He and His Father are one. Note that the oneness of the Godhead is not an institutional oneness, but an ontological oneness. The three persons of the Trinity are one Being. If Christians are to be one with each in that way, it will not be expressed by being a well-functioning organization. Becoming a Christian requires an ontological change: we go from being people whose natural habitat is sin to being people whose natural habit is righteousness, and this change occurs because we are united with Christ in His death and in His resurrection, with the result that we become new creations. The ontological oneness of the Church is grounded in the oneness that each Christian has with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, which then becomes the oneness each Christian has with every other Christian.

Therefore, we should none of us identify primarily in terms of a denomination or a party, saying "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to John Calvin."² We identify as those who belong to Christ. Which is not to say that Apollos and Paul and Calvin are indistinguishable from one another: Their styles of preaching, teaching, and theologizing are not identical. Their ministerial callings are not the same. The cultures from which they come and in which they work are different. These differences of gifts and ministry do not undermine or threaten the genuine oneness of the Church. They enrich that oneness.

The book of Ephesians also speaks of Christian oneness as rooted in the uniqueness of Jesus. What Christians all share is that each of us has been chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world.³ From the beginning, God has planned to adopt those made in His image as His children through the work of Jesus. The coming of Jesus into the world is not plan B; this has always been the plan. If Adam and Eve had not sinned (and sin was not inevitable), then this plan would have been less painful, but always the plan was to join humanity into a unity around the person of Jesus.

In fact, Ephesians goes so far as to suggest that the reason for the incarnation was precisely this process of forming a glorified humanity in the likeness of Jesus, that is, forming the Church.⁴ The salvation of individual human beings, treated in Ephesians 1, is important precisely because it contributes to the bigger goal of forming the Church, which embodies this new human nature after the likeness of Jesus. This new humanity is formed by the union of diverse human beings in a way that makes them one while yet retaining their differences. The teaching of Ephesians leaves us no way to understand individual salvation apart from incorporation into this new ecclesial community. In fact, we must conclude that the existence of the Church is the whole point of the creation of human beings, perhaps the whole point of the creation of the world.

² cf. 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:4–5.

³ cf. Ephesians 1:3–13.

⁴ Ephesians 2:13–22.

Community is the goal, not individual happiness, specifically a community in which the diversity that God placed into the creation is all brought together in order to give God praise.

For Ephesians moves seamlessly from speaking of the oneness of this new humanity to praise for diversity within the Church. The manifold fecundity (*polypoikilos*) of God's wisdom is expressed in the answering variety of the Church.⁵ God's wisdom is so great, so abundant, so fertile and life-giving and generative that it requires all the different sorts of Christians that there are or have every been or ever will be to begin to express that wisdom. The idea that the oneness of the Church requires all Christians throughout the world and throughout history to have the same polity makes no more sense than to suggest that all Christians should speak the same language, manifest the same gifts, or have the same culture. Doesn't it make much better sense to assume that God intends for His praises to be sung in every language using every kind of music, and that God intends His Being to be extolled using every form of logic and every style of philosophy, and that God intends for His will be to obeyed by people with every possible gift and talent?

Unity does place requirements on us. Ephesians 2:14 says that the wall of hostility between Jew and Greek has been taken down; we must not try to put it up again. The union between them is not a homogenization. The Gentile does not have to become a Jew in order to be received without hostility. The fact of differences or even of disagreement is not sufficient reason for hostility. The differences between us may delight us, may amuse us, may puzzle us, may sometimes even exasperate us. But they may not and do not excuse hostility, nor do they excuse a refusal to acknowledge our relatedness.

Think of the oneness of an extended family, the sort of extended family that gathers every year for a family reunion that requires reserving a park or a ballroom to accommodate everyone who is there. Is the union of the family undermined by the fact that people live in different parts of the country or even different parts of the world? Of course not. Part of the joy of the reunion is this gathering with those who are both like us and not like us at the same time. Is the family union undermined by the fact that relatives may have very different ways of organizing their separate households? Not at all. There is no expectation of likeness on such matters, even if we may sometimes be baffled by our differences. Is it undermined by the fact that they have different political views, or root for different sports teams, or eat different kinds of foods? No. The union of the extended family is rooted in a common source, in that they are all descended from a common pair of people. And within such a family when it is functioning properly diversity is not a source of hostility. The Church is also defined by a common source: our union with Christ.

I have been teaching undergraduates for more than twenty years now, and never once have I heard a student of mine says: "Only my church is the true Church." My students sometimes have trouble expressing criticism of each other; they tend to default to uncritical affirmation. That is the weakness of their generation. But their great strength is that they hate, hate, hate dividing walls of hostility. Perhaps it is because I spend so much time with them that I just don't see a lot of those dividing walls in the Church of our era. I don't know any Presbyterians who think that Presbyterianism is the only true form of Christianity. I don't even know any Roman Catholics who

⁵ Ephesians 3:10.

think that Roman Catholicism is the only true form of Christianity. Dividing walls of hostility are not the great problem of our age, at least not here in the United States.

To the extent that there are still dividing walls of hostility between ECO and the PC(USA), we need to repent of that and do what we can to tear those walls down. That does not mean offering uncritical affirmation to one another. However, if you are truly united with Christ, then you are also united with all the other imperfect, sinful people who are united with Christ; they are all your brothers and sisters, even if you disapprove of some of the things they do, and even if they disapprove of you.

I am frequently told that division in the Church is a great obstacle to evangelism, but this again makes no sense to me. Of course, hostility between Christians can indeed be a barrier to evangelism. As fallen people, we have a natural tendency to define ourselves in opposition to others. We create division and separate ourselves into opposing groups where such division is not necessary. Divisions that start out as benign—things like football rivalries or political parties—become strategies for demonizing one another and putting up high walls of hostility to separate ourselves from those with whom we disagree. But it is the hostility, not the variety, that is an obstacle.

Our culture loves multiplicity, loves diversity, and loves variety. Granted that the variety of the Church may sometimes confuse someone who is encountering Christianity for the first time. Similarly, someone who is listening to a new style of music for the first time will find the distinctions within that style confusing, but that is not generally a reason to stop exploring. So I don't believe that the variety of the Church is an obstacle to evangelism. In fact, I have found it to be very helpful. Most of my evangelistic work is with students, and most of my students have had experience of church already in their life. If they're now identifying as non-Christians—usually as atheists or agnostics—it's often because that experience was a negative one. I find that it is very helpful to talk to them about the Church as a great house with many different rooms—an analogy that C. S. Lewis lays out in some detail in *Mere Christianity*. I urge them to find another room. I tell them that the Church is large, and that they should not leave Christianity because they have concluded that they can no longer live in the part of the Church where they were raised. Lewis makes clear that the point is not to find a room where everything is to your own taste, and I reinforce that. But I would much rather see a young person who has been alienated from one branch of the church move into some other part of the church, even a part about which I have reservations, than see that young person walk away altogether.

My impression is that divisions in the Church are a bigger obstacle for Christians than for non-Christians, since they introduce the frightening idea that the way we do Church might not be the best way. Which of course is true. It might not be. In fact, it probably isn't. The way your family functions might not be the best way for a family to function either. In fact, odds are high that there are better ways. That doesn't mean you give up on having a family, or even that you abandon your current family to go in search of a different one. I love the family I have not because I'm convinced they're the best family in the world but because they're mine, because I've been placed here, and I believe God's providence is behind that placing. Loving my family does not require me to look down on any other families. It does not require any wall of hostility between my family and other families. In fact, my own family will be enriched by friendships with other families and exposure to other ways of interacting within a family.

This analogy of a household is one that is built into the ECO ethos. One reason that we kept the nickname “ECO” even after we changed our official name is because we always intended the name to echo the Greek word **οἶκος**, which Thayer’s Greek Lexicon defines both as the house or place where one has decided to settle and as the inhabitants of such a place, the household. It’s also sometimes used for a temple. Not surprisingly, the word is sometimes used metaphorically in the New Testament for the Church as “the household of God.”⁶

All of this being said, there surely are things on which we should expect explicit and substantial union when talking with other Christians. Ephesians gives us a list: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”⁷ With the exception of baptism (on which Christians have managed to disagree to a truly shocking extent, such that Christians don’t all recognize each other’s baptisms, which might really be something that’s disrespectful of God) this list is a pretty good summary of the ecumenical consensus that we find in documents such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Even denominations that claim to be non-creedal (those that say they have “no creed but Christ” or perhaps “no creed but the Bible”) generally agree with the substance of these creeds. Perhaps the clearest of the ecumenical creeds is the Athanasian, which tells us that there are two great mysteries that define the Christian faith: the Trinity and the incarnation. If you deny that God is one Being and three persons, or if you deny that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human, then it is questionable whether you are indeed a Christian at all, even though you may be a very nice person, attempting to live a good life. But being a Christian is not about being a nice person attempting to live a good life. It’s about union with Christ, and if you don’t acknowledge who he is, then in what sense can you claim union with him? This is why Christians do not affirm that we are of one body with Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses, even though some of members of such groups claim to be Christians. Christians affirm the Trinity and the incarnation, and those who deny these fundamental truths cannot realistically be seen as Christian, since they are denying the uniqueness of Christ.

The Church is Catholic

As already mentioned, starting in Ephesians 2 Paul begins to talk about not only the oneness of the Church but also its variety, or catholicity. The Roman Catholic Church doesn’t own the word “catholicity” any more ECO owns the words Presbyterian or Evangelical. The word “catholic” just means including everything. Someone who claims to have a catholic palette is willing to eat anything, and someone who has a catholic taste in literature will read all kinds of books. So when we say that Church is catholic, we are saying that it includes all varieties of people. That is precisely what is implied (per above) in the teaching about the joining of Jew and Gentile into a new humanity, in that they do not lose their identities as Jews and Gentiles in order to become one. In fact, Paul’s big point is that the Gentiles get to remain Gentiles and still

⁶ 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17.

⁷ Ephesians 4:4–6.

be Christian. Paul's whole ministry is devoted to defending the catholicity, i.e. the variety and diversity of the Church.

The Church takes in the great diversity of humanity. God placed into the creation all the seeds of the billions of ways that human beings are in the world: what we look like, how we're gifted, how we organize ourselves, and on and on. We have already considered Ephesians 3:10, in which the rich variety of God's wisdom is expressed in the variety of the Church. God's manifold wisdom is so multi-valent, so expressive, so enormous, that it takes all the kinds of Christians that there have ever been and ever will be in the world to begin to express it. The diversity of the Church is not a problem to be solved. It's a value-added quality to be celebrated. Catholicity is something that we confess as a very good thing about the Church. We are grateful that not every church is the same, that there are churches using every kind of music in the world to praise God. If that weren't true, there would be kinds of music not brought to glorify Him, and that would be wrong. Every tribe, tongue, and nation must be brought to glorify God for the fullness of His wisdom to be displayed.

The New Testament Church adds other sorts of variety to the people of God. Not only are Jew and Gentile necessary to the catholicity of the church, but so are slave and free, male and female, children and parents, married and single. All these expansions would be confusing to the Old Testament people of God. Whereas the people of Israel were an ethnic group and a nation who flourished and grew by having strong families with lots of children, the Church is a community that welcomes the stranger, that reaches out to every corner of the world, that flourishes and grows by evangelism and baptism. The apostle Paul can present himself as the father of hundreds of Gentile Christians, claiming the fulfillment of Old Testament promises about the fruitfulness of unmarried women, of eunuchs, and of those who are barren. Unlike the family, the Church is not a natural societal structure; it is a supernatural reality, and its flourishing depends on the presence of Holy Spirit, not on our natural powers.

The natural family is a creational structure that is still precious to us, both because it was the first training ground given to human beings for learning about love and community and also because since the coming of Jesus marriage has taken on the new function of reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church. However, Jesus tells us that marriage will not persist into the new creation, and so for Christians the family is not as central to our way of life as it was for the people of Israel. It has become a transitional structure. It is still a good thing; its time is not yet over. And yet for us already now our central community must be the Church, in which we are all brothers and sisters. Our families must be situated within this larger, supernatural reality that will persist into the new creation. This means that families function differently under the new covenant than under the old. The accommodations to fallenness that we find in Old Testament hierarchies such as masters and slaves or in hierarchical relationships between men and women are no longer appropriate now that we have been set free through the work of Jesus.

We can also affirm the variety of traditions within the Christian Church. Roman Catholics have a tendency to use the word "charism" for these gifts of a tradition, and I think that's a word worth borrowing. They often use it for different streams within Roman Catholicism: so for instance they might speak of the Franciscan charism and the Benedictine charism. So what is the particular charism of our Presbyterian tradition? What is the particular charism of ECO? This way of thinking is more helpful than trying to identify strengths and weaknesses. If, for instance, a traditional

charism of the Presbyterian tradition has been an emphasis on theology and on Christian education, this does not mean that traditions with other charisms are somehow defective. Other traditions have their own gifts, and we need all the different approaches to being a Christian in order to make up the whole. That is why God created us with differences.

This does not mean that all theological views are correct. Someday in the new creation we will know much more than we do now about God's electing love for us, to take just one example, and all of our different theories about that electing love will have to be corrected against our experience of the reality. The Church's catholicity is not an exercise in relativism, not a claim that truth is unimportant. But it is a way to think more humbly about what we believe, recognizing that God's nature and work is so far beyond our ability to understand that it is highly unlikely any one tradition has everything right. Of course we need to keep thinking and learning, because it is our calling to long for God, to be ever drawn closer to Him, to be ever more immersed in the teachings of Scripture, ever discovering new insights there. Of course we need to correct ideas that we honestly believe are opposed to Scripture, and of course we have every right within our own tradition to insist on conformity to a system of thought that has been tested over time, that we share with one another, and that gives coherence to our life together. But we do all these things from a place of humility, recognizing the authority of those who are already members of the Church Triumphant whose teaching and thought has shaped the Church up to this time, but also recognizing the grandeur and the size and the variety of the Church universal in the world today.

We are not relativists, but we should be perspectivists. That is to say, we should recognize that each of us has a very specific and narrow perspective on the truth. We only see slivers of it, and we depend on sharing with other Christians from other places and other times who are equipped to see other slivers in order to learn more and to grow in our knowledge of God's greatness and grace. This is why we care so much about voices within our own Presbyterian/Reformed tradition from the past and also from other parts of the world, but this is also why we need to listen to traditions beyond our own.

Just as we know that there will be no marriage in the new creation, so I think we can be reasonably certain there will be no denominations there either. Just as we are not required to give up marriage now in anticipation of that reality, but rather to de-center marriage, we are also not required to give up functioning within denominations or traditions. But they should not be too central to our self-understanding as Christians. We need to be Christians within specific and particular communities because we are finite and limited people. I do not have the capacity to love the global Church in any really meaningful way. It is too big for me to apprehend. I need to learn about living in community within a particular congregation, and I need to be loyal to a particular denomination and a particular tradition, because I need to practice living communally and submitting my mind as well as my behavior to the discipline of life together.

We in ECO can be grateful that in our founding we set out deliberately to make sure that our new community would function in this way. We avoided using the language of denomination. Instead, we spoke of ourselves as an *order*, that is, a community bound by a shared life that follows an ordered practice of prayer, Bible study, worship, and service. Everything about the highly individualistic culture in which we find ourselves exerts pressure against such a shared,

ordered life, but we are still working on living out that commitment to be an order, to find more and more ways in which we share life together.

Just as I often hear people complaining about the celebration of Reformation Day, so too I often hear comments about our decision in ECO to start a new denomination rather than join with an already existing community. The same people who think that Protestants should feel guilty about being Protestant think that there is something shameful in forming a new denomination. But this also makes no sense to me. If indeed we are an order, a community designed to help us live out the gospel more faithfully by sharing our commitments with each other and by holding one another accountable to keep those commitments, how is that a bad thing? It seems to me that just as a new church plant can reach people who cannot be reached by an established church, so too a new denomination can reach both individuals and congregations who cannot be helped by an established denomination. A new denomination may be a new movement, a new approach not only to evangelism but also to worship, to mission, to service, and to holy living, such that the fullness of God's wisdom can begin to be expressed in yet another way. Those of us in ECO need to commit to that vision of our ordered life together.

If we can exist together as Christians of many different sorts without hostility, then perhaps we can embrace the positive view of variety within the Church that Paul describes in Ephesians 3, a variety that is not a threat to the oneness of the Church but rather grows out of the genuine oneness of the Church. The diversity of the Church in all these ways of being has been part of God's design from the beginning.

The Church is Holy

In Ephesians 4 and 5, Paul moves to a discussion of the Church's holiness after he has thoroughly canvassed the ideas of oneness and diversity. He speaks of this briefly at the end of chapter 3, then (after recapitulating his earlier treatment of oneness and diversity at the beginning of chapter 4) he begins to talk about how we have to live: "you must no longer live as the gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God..." (4:17). Whereas the earlier conversation was affirming that Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to be incorporated into the new humanity of Jesus, here Paul is stressing the need to separate from the culture out of which you have been called. He talks about all the sins that need to be conquered in this community. Just as in our own day and our own culture, many of the sins that are hard to shake involve sexual behavior. I'm not going to go into detail about the nature of holiness here, since I think this is something that we tend to agree about within ECO. My point here is this: the affirmation of diversity and catholicity in the Church does not mean that we can do whatever we want. All Christians of all traditions in all times and places are called to holiness of life.

This is not negotiable. Indeed, it is deeply connected to both the oneness and the catholicity of the Church. For the holiness of Jesus to be pouring into me, I must be united to Christ through the Holy Spirit, submitting to Him, bowing to Him, so that He is becoming more while I become less. Since that union with Christ is precisely what defines the Church, holiness

of life must obviously be connected to life of the Church. The primary way in which we submit to Jesus is to submit to one another, specifically by submitting to the discipline of the Church.

Of course, that assumes that the church of which you are a part practices discipline. If it is a good church, as I trust most of our ECO congregations are, that discipline is probably most of the time administered in a proactive, gentle way. People of my generation like to tell stories about the unfair, punitive ways in which discipline used to be enforced in churches – stories that are probably not very fair to the religious experiences of our parents’ and grand-parents’ generations. But even assuming that discipline has at some times been too severe, or that it has been enforced unevenly, that does not mean that now we should have no discipline at all.

The best discipline is the sort that intervenes before you’ve gotten very far down the road of rebellion. Imagine that you’re walking to your car after Bible study, and someone walking with you says, “You know, tonight the way you were joking about your husband/wife was kind of angry. Is something going on? Is there something I can pray for that would help you?” That’s good discipline. Good discipline happens when we pay attention to one another, when we notice when people are starting to step off the path and we call each gently back. Good discipline happens when we know one another well enough to meddle in each other’s lives. Good discipline of pastors happens when presbyteries are small enough and connected enough that members know each other well and are paying attention to one another’s ministries.

Discipline ought to be the constant preventive work of calling each other back before we have strayed very far. And when someone who is good at hiding and good at avoiding such preventive scrutiny is discovered to have wandered a long way from the path – either by falling away from holiness of life or by falling away from right teaching and doctrine – then discipline needs to accept the burden of enforcing the standards that we claim to share.

That is a very counter-cultural practice in our time and place. If every culture has somethings in it that conflict with the gospel and need to be corrected, this resistance to discipline may be one of the American thing. Americans are very reluctant to admit that anyone has the right to meddle in our lives. And that’s why all over the US today there are denominations that have very nice policies about holiness of life of their clergy, but those policies are not enforced.

The problem is that the other two marks of the Church – oneness and catholicity – both depend on holiness. If we are unwilling to call one another to holiness, if we grow squeamish at the thought of exercising discipline, the unity of the Church is undermined and catholicity becomes an excuse to have no standards at all. This is certainly not what Paul intends when he calls for an end to hostility between Jew and Gentile. Recall that in his letters to the Corinthians he was firm about the need to discipline the man who was living in sin with his father’s wife. In that context, Paul was clear that he was not speaking about holding all the people of the world accountable to the standard of sexual purity, but that members of the Church must hold one another accountable to such standards. Paul explicitly says that passing judgment on people out in the world is none of his business. He’s only interested in the holiness or lack of holiness of those within the Church.⁸

⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:9–13.

All too often, we think about discipline the other way around. We say that we don't want to associate with worldly people because they're so sinful, but when members of our church fall into some sort of sin, we give each other a pass. We say things like, "My poor friend is just so weak." And this is not surprising. After all, within a community of like-minded people we often have the same or similar sins. If I insist on holding you accountable today, someone might hold me accountable tomorrow. It's far more comfortable to do what we prefer, which is to put all our judgment on the world outside while being so gentle with one another that there is no internal discipline at all. But that is not the Biblical teaching. Instead, we are supposed to be helping each other to become holy.

One, Catholic, and Holy

Notice what we have here: three things that reinforce each other: oneness, catholicity, holiness. If one disappears, the whole Church falls apart. If there's no unity, all the diversity is not a good thing at all; it's just a chaotic mess with no pattern or reason for existence. It's just multiplicity for the sake of multiplicity. We affirm the diversity that reflects God's grace, wisdom, creation, and that requires reflecting God's oneness as well. If there's not unity, we can't help each other to be holy because we have no connection with each other, we don't recognize accountability to one another, and we don't know one another well enough to exercise any discipline.

Without catholicity, all that unity can become an oppressive force. My grandparents immigrated to the United States to escape a state church that was imposing a chilling sort of unity as conformity. In such a context, difference and a lack of holiness soon get collapsed into one another, as if anyone not like me isn't holy. As if anyone who's not like me should be subject to discipline.

Without holiness, this diverse group of people is no longer a Church. It doesn't reflect the presence of God. The whole point of being the Church is to show God's glory into the world, to put His goodness and wisdom and nature on display. If we aren't worried enough or committed enough to work toward holiness together in our little communities, then in what sense are we the Church? The Church is defined by the presence of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Jesus. When that connection isn't there, can you even claim to be the Church?

Every church that has ever been has fallen short of this vision of oneness, catholicity, and holiness. We in ECO will not live it out perfectly. But we can minimize our errors if we are intentional about pursuing all three of these marks of the Church in a connected way, if we are attentive when one of the three is no longer receiving our attention. May we overcome our cultural fear of being judgmental in order to be holy people, calling each other to holiness. May all our gifts be deployed and displayed for God's glory. And in all of our life together, may we be one with each other through our union with Christ.

The Church's First Forty Days: A Look at Acts 1:1–11

Rev. Dr. Mark Patterson

The word “church” never occurs in Luke’s Gospel. We read of people gathering around Jesus to listen to his teaching, seek his healing, even gather with him at the Last Supper. But as important as these were and as right and good as they were, these gatherings were not considered by Luke to be the church. For the church is not comprised of people merely interested in Jesus or in what he can do or give. The church exists only as a body gathered around the resurrected Jesus. It is not a collection of people “interested” in Jesus but a people touched and transformed by Jesus’ resurrection and transferred into the kingdom of his lordship and reign. While it is popular to say the church was “born” at Pentecost with the giving of the Spirit, it is more accurate to say the church was born when the resurrected Jesus gathered his disciples together and commissioned them to continue his work.

Luke begins his history of church by describing its first forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension. In this brief summary we are given a description of what it means to be the church.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”¹

In this brief account, Luke gives us insight into the essential character and practices of the church. He unveils its nature and purpose and announces the source of its power and life. He describes its hope and mission. In describing a small part of Jesus’ interaction with his disciples over these forty days Luke provides seven precious insights into the essential realities and characteristics of the church.

The church is where Jesus continues the work he began.

Luke begins by referencing his first work, his gospel. In the first verse he connects all he wrote in that first work with what he is about to describe in this, his second work. In that first work he

¹ Acts 1:1–11, ESV.

described all Jesus began to do and teach “until the day he was taken up.” With this simple phrase it is clearly implied that what follows is a description of Jesus’ continuing work. What Jesus began in his earthly ministry, what he demonstrated to his disciples and taught them to know and live is now continued in the church. Even more, Jesus explicitly ends his time with them saying, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (v. 8b). The church is nothing less than the body through which Jesus continues the work and teaching he began. And this work is done as witnesses of his resurrected presence, as ambassadors of his kingdom, as those who live and work in his image.

The church is where his elect are gathered, prepared, and sent out.

While it is popularly perceived that the church is a volunteer organization, a body some choose to join, biblically, it is God who chooses us, calling to himself and making us his people. We learn here from Luke that Jesus gave “commands through his Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” Having been called, taught, and prepared during Jesus’ earthly ministry the apostles’ training now continues under the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is the living community of God’s elect, gathered in his presence, prepared, trained, and equipped, and then sent out as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. The training and teaching of the disciples we see as he lived among them now continues in the church, through the Holy Spirit as God’s elect are prepared and sent into mission and service.

The church is where Jesus shows himself to be fully alive after his sufferings.

Luke tells us that over these forty days Jesus presented himself alive to his disciples, after his suffering, by many proofs. The gospels and their narrative of Jesus’ life are the theological center of the Bible. The cross of Jesus is the center of the gospels. It is here, more than any other point that the great separation occurs. For the cross of Jesus is scandalous. It has been a stumbling block and point of controversy from the first days of the church, and it remains so today. But for those who understand, the place of greatest weakness and failure is in fact the point of God’s most loving act and greatest victory. But its power is only known and understood through the resurrection. Thus, in these brief and simple words we learn that Jesus presented himself as very much alive after all he had suffered. Crucified, dead, and buried, Jesus is now seen alive and known as the one who conquered sin, death, and the devil. The church is where Jesus continues to show himself alive. Here the work he began continues under his power and guidance. Here his victories specifically manifest in the lives of his people. It is in the church, in and through the ordinary lives of his people, that Jesus continues to show himself very much alive and his sufferings which seemed a victory of evil over good is shown to be the opposite as lives are changed by the living and victorious Lord.

The church is where the kingdom of God becomes visible.

This resurrection life seen in disciples is nothing less than the unveiling of God’s heavenly kingdom. The veil is lifted, if only a bit, and we begin to see a different reality in the lives of those called to his presence. Luke tells us that once gathered Jesus spoke to them about the kingdom

of God. In one sense there is nothing new here. The topic Jesus most spoke of and taught about during his earthly ministry was the kingdom of God. But that is Luke's point, both in his gospel and now in his history of the church birth and first years. What Jesus began to do and teach is continuing here, among these people. The living and resurrected Jesus continues nothing more or less than that which he started while walking among them. And in this work of his, a new people come into existence, people of a new citizenry, people of different values, hopes, and goals. And it is in the live out of these that the kingdom of God becomes visible to the world. The fact that this reality is shrouded, covered too often in that which seems its very opposite, does not change the fact that it is occurring. For in the church and through the witness of the church under the power of the Spirit Jesus continues to summon his people into a new a different kingdom. In their response, in their submission to his rule and reign, the kingdom of God becomes visible in the world.

The church is where people live under his rule, obeying his word.

In these verses Luke tells us that Jesus had given commands through his Holy Spirit and he closes with a specific command of Jesus: the disciples were not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.

The church is where people are empowered for ministry in the image of Jesus.

Jesus reminds them of his promise that they would be "baptized in the Holy Spirit." This phrase is one not often heard in Presbyterian circles and is one some may feel reflects more a Pentecostal than Presbyterian perspective. But the fact is, the phrase is biblical² and as such deserves an important place in our understanding of both the Holy Spirit and the church. Most basically, this phrase describes the gift of Spirit given to the church for fulfilling of its call and ministry. But the Spirit is far more than a gift of anointing; it refers to an act that creates profound change in our position before God and the world and a profound change in our condition. Thus, apart from God's anointing Spirit the Christian life is impossible, no ministry will succeed, and no church would flourish. But what does it mean to be "baptized in the Spirit"? The answer to this could fill a book (and has!). But at the most basic level "baptized in the Spirit" expresses five realities.

1. Baptism in the Spirit is a relational encounter with God in which he unveils both the depth our need for him and the magnificence of his love, grace, and power to meet that need. By the Spirit we are confronted with the magnitude of our sin and made able to grasp his salvation.
2. Baptism in the Spirit is an act of God that transforms our hearts and will for his purpose (see Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1).
3. Baptism in the Spirit is purity from God that separates us from sin and brings genuine freedom and newness of life.
4. Baptism in the Spirit is a gift from God that changes our spiritual standing before him.

² Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5, and 11:16. See also Acts 8:16 and 1 Corinthians 12:13.

5. Baptism in the Spirit is an anointing of God that enables believers to do ministry after the image of Jesus.
6. Baptism in the Spirit is God's steadfast, unending, relational presence with us through the whole of our lives.

The Church is where an eschatological community awaits the return of Jesus and establishing of his kingdom.

The hope of the church, that for which it yearns most, is the return of Jesus and the creation of a new heavens and new earth. The only question Luke records the disciples asking Jesus during these first forty days was regarding when this would occur: Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? The disciple's question can only be understood in light of the resurrection and what it signified. For Israel awaited and expected the coming Day of the Lord when all things would be made right, the righteous raised to new life.³ But this was expected at the end. Jesus's resurrection raised many questions: has the end begun? Why only one and not many? Why did this "last days event" occur without any of the others that were expected? But with their question and Jesus' response we learn yet more about the church.

1. The singular great hope of the church is the return of Jesus, the new heavens and new earth, and his glorious reign as King. We rightly hope for the forgiveness of our sins, peace, salvation, and numerous other things. But these pale before the great, defining hope of Jesus' return and his setting right all things.
2. We do not know when this will occur, nor should we expect to. Despite countless predictions throughout church history Jesus made clear to the church that *it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority* (v. 7). We await the return of Jesus humbly acknowledging that we have no idea when this will occur and that it is not for us to know. In the meantime, we wait with expectation, obediently working at the mission he has given us.
3. The church, in this time between the resurrection and return of Jesus, is an eschatological community. With the resurrection, the end times have been initiated and we live with the reality of the end unfolding in our midst. Those things we will know fully only when we stand before Jesus. But they have, nevertheless, begun: heaven's perfect forgiveness may be known in this present time. Reconciliation with God is not just a future, eternal event but one we can experience now. God's presence may be known, the values of his kingdom grasped and lived in this time. The Kingdom of God has begun and its realities may be known, even as we wait its fulfillment and consummation.

Luke uses only eleven verses to describe the forty days Jesus had with his disciples between the resurrection and ascension. It is remarkably brief, perhaps even frustratingly so. Yet in these eleven verses we are given characteristics of the church that will manifest through the rest of Acts and see elaboration through the rest of the New Testament. Whatever details and

³ Cf. John 11:24.

examples may arise across the life and history of the church, these essential characteristics remain defining.

The Sign of the Kingdom of God

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

What is the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God? How do we know what a real church is as opposed to a false one? And what is the church's reason for being? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer to these questions can be found in a single concept: the church is a sign in a similar way to the sacraments. This chapter suggests that understanding how signs work enable us to discern what the church is and is for, and so to avoid the dangers of confusing the church for the kingdom, or neglecting the church for individualist faith.

Church as Sign

The church is a sign that signifies and participates in the people of God, and in this way is the body of Christ.

First of all, the church is a sign. Whether we're talking about a local church body or the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, we are discussing something that has a hard-to-define reality. Is the church an institution? No, not really, though it certainly uses institutions.¹ Is the church a people? Yes, of course, but more must be said about who those people are and what they are doing. The church is hard to define, and that difficulty of definition should clue us into the fact that we're not talking about a simple object, but a symbol or sign.

In our present age signs and symbols have been denigrated. People use the word "symbolic" to mean "pointless" as in "His statements about anti-racism are purely symbolic." We'd take that sentence to mean that the person in question was only saying what he had to but didn't really mean it. But that's not what symbols really are. Symbols occupy a special kind of reality between the physical and the ideal. They touch both and provide a pathway between them. In Christian theological tradition, signs and symbols are the very bedrock of God's self-revelation. After all, Jesus is the Word, the *logos*. What is a word if not a sign? Words direct us from the spoken sound or written ink to a concept beyond sound and light. God created through symbols that became realities. He spoke words and creation was formed. Alas, we do not possess quite such power. But our symbols can still be powerful. They have the ability to open new vistas, new points of view, and so create a new human social reality as we join together around new ideas.

So, when we talk about signs and symbols, we shouldn't only have in mind things like a "Stop" sign or other traffic signs. These signs cause people to take action, and they do help create a type of social world in which we have certain hopes and expectations ("Are we there yet?" "Look, the sign says 50 more miles."). But road signs do not invite us to participate in the reality they point to. A sign for Missoula, MT doesn't really reveal Missoula and its character to us, it just points to where it is.

¹ See my chapter on "5 Misunderstandings" for more about the institution.

The church is a different kind of sign, one in which the sign *participates* in the reality it points to. We have other signs or symbols like it. Think about money. A dollar bill is a sign that signifies itself and its use brings people in to participate in the reality of money, or the economy. Or consider the symbol of an American flag. The flag in itself is a piece of cloth, but it invites the observer to participate in the concept it is meant to symbolize. Thus, for many Americans, the flag is treated as a sacred symbol such that letting it touch the ground, or stepping on it, is akin to a kind of blasphemy. Burning a flag is a type of attack on the substance of the nation, because the flag participates in the reality of the nation.

Thus, the church is a special kind of symbol, created by Jesus, the Word of God. It not only points to the reality of the kingdom of God, it also invites people to participate in the reality of the kingdom of God. Just as we would not consider a flag to be the whole of America, so too we cannot consider the church to be the fullness of the kingdom of God. God's work is not confined to the church, even if the church ought to be its main representative.

The church as a symbol of the kingdom of God means that the church is supposed to point to everything the kingdom of God is. The church participates in, and *reveals* God's kingdom to the world. But what is that reality, the kingdom of God? Space prevents a detailed description based on biblical texts that characterize it. However, by considering the nature of any kingdom, we can understand something of what Jesus was talking about in his annunciation of the kingdom's arrival. A kingdom is, at its most basic, the king and his subjects. While kingdoms can have geographic claims to dominion as well as complex institutions and legal systems, none of these are necessary for a kingdom. Jesus claimed to himself embody the kingdom. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you"² is Jesus' claim that the kingdom is found in him, the king. His call to follow him is a call to join his kingdom. Thus, Jesus is building a kingdom in a very specific way, not through regional conquests or institutionalization, but by reconciling people to God in himself. This is the foundation of the kingdom of God. Those who pledge their allegiance to Christ as king and are faithful in this (i.e. not wolves in sheep's clothing), are subjects of the kingdom of God. Indeed, loyal people are the very thing that comprise the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, the people on their own cannot be the kingdom of God. A people without a king can never be a kingdom. And so it is with the church. The church cannot create, build, grow, or expand the kingdom of God. Only the king can do this by bringing more people into reconciliation with him. The church's job is to point to the kingdom of God, to make its presence known by embodying the kingdom of God in itself.

This means that a local church has the incredible ability to participate in the whole of the kingdom of God even as it remains a small symbol of it. It can also reveal to its context what it looks like when God is king. It does this by being a symbol. Not a "mere" symbol, but a full-bodied symbol that touches upon all areas of life.

² Luke 17:21.

Authenticity of the Sign: the Marks or Characteristics

But how do we know what is a true symbol of the kingdom of God, and what is a false symbol? The most basic and obvious answer is whether a so-called church points to the king, Jesus. Any church that points elsewhere, even to ideas like the common good, or Judeo-Christian values, or even “kingdom principles” points not to Jesus the king but to what we can obtain from Jesus without needing to submit to him.

Historically, the Reformed tradition has identified three “marks” of a true church.

1. Right administration of the word of God
2. Right administration of the sacraments
3. Right performance of discipline (or more positively put, discipleship).³

We might say that these are marks of authenticity. A church that does not teach the word of God, or teaches it wrongly, is not a true church. A church that does not perform the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper is deficient and not a true church. And a church that does not practice discipline or active accountable discipleship is also a deficient church. If any of these marks are missing, the symbol is not pointing to the kingdom of God, but somewhere else. So, churches that do not practice discipline do not reveal God’s justice, his care for the oppressed and wronged, or the seriousness of sin, no matter how much the preacher talks about it. Churches that take lightly the sacraments or neglect them are also not pointing to the fullness of the kingdom of God in which reconciliation looks like a feast provided by God.

The Mission of a Sign and the Ontology of Signs

There are three basic ways a sign can exist, three basic sacramental traditions in Christianity.⁴ Which version we choose has profound implications on the mission of the church.

The first way a sign can exist is as a microcosm of the whole. In ancient pre-Christian belief this was the most common understanding of signs. A sign was the reality, just in miniature. This kind of perspective is inherent in magic in which an object like a human hair retains a connection to the whole person, and harm done to a human hair or a curse spoken over it, even after it long left the owner’s head, can create effects on the person. This view is still very active in the world, though it is often called “superstition” in the Western tradition from ancient Greek and Roman philosophers to modern scientists. The popular understanding of the Roman Catholic tradition holds this perspective, specifically in its perspective on the sacraments. So, the bread becomes the body of Christ. By this logic, the church and the kingdom are in danger of being confused. So it was that in historical Roman Catholicism, Christ had delegated his authority to his disciples who then instituted this authority in the church. The church was then just an extension of the kingdom and kingship of God. The benefit of this perspective is that believers are very certain of their salvation and standing before God, because there are human institutional representatives who can tell them with certainty where they stand. But the downside of this

³ ECO’s *Essential Tenets* (III.C) and *Polity* (1.0603a) both enshrine these three marks.

⁴ For more on this see the chapter “Advanced Sacramentology” in ECO’s *The Lord’s Supper: Theology and Resources*.

understanding of the church is the flip side of its benefit. Any corruption in a human institution causes significant damage in trust. This means there's a significant pressure to cover up corruption and sin as the moral failure of a bishop, let alone a Pope would call into question the whole legitimacy of the kingdom of God and Christ's mission.

The second way a sign can exist is as a mere pointer. This is the opposite perspective of the first. One way the UK and the US differ in terms of traffic signs is that the UK rarely finds it necessary to put a "Stop" or "Yield/Give Way" sign at every intersection. The UK assumes drivers will figure out, especially in neighborhoods, how to responsibly drive, and not blast through intersections. Here, the sign is unnecessary and exists only where the point needs to be reemphasized. If we apply this metaphor to the church, we find Christians who assume the church is kind of an optional extra. Certainly it is an aid and points to something that the individual does not, but there's an assumption that the church is a mere sign, like a road marker. While few theologians would ever explicitly say this, the Evangelical tradition, derived from Baptist and free-church congregational traditions, do see the church as primarily a human institution organized for the benefit of the local community, rather than a symbol that participates in a greater reality. This view is largely dominant in our time, as churches are treated as voluntary associations that exist to provide some value-added benefit to what is the essential aspect of Christianity: the individual and her personal relationship with Jesus. The benefit of this perspective is that these churches have the potential to rapidly adapt to the needs of their context without institutional overhead. But the drawbacks are all-too clear for us today. The consumer-nature of the modern church is inherent in this type of thinking. If the sign is arbitrary, why not make the sign something that is most relevant or attractive to our context? So too is the notion of the megachurch celebrity pastor inherent in this type of thinking. If the church is a human institution that is a mere pointer, it can be built around a human personality rather than around the body of Christ. It is also constantly pressured into a market-based strategy that can easily lose track of what it was supposed to be pointing to.

The third way a sign can exist is as a participatory sign. Here the sign owes its existence to a reality apart from itself, but it cannot be confused with the reality itself. A national flag was mentioned earlier, but a wedding ring is another example. The wedding ring is not lightly put on or taken off because the relational reality it symbolizes is deeply solemn. A movie can show a man taking off his wedding ring as he gets in the car, anticipating that he will soon commit adultery. The Reformed and Presbyterian tradition has viewed the church as just such a symbol. The church points to and participates in the reality of the kingdom. It is not the kingdom. But nor is the church some arbitrary human institution that exists to benefit individual Christians. The church is the people of God, the subjects of the kingdom of God, and there is no salvation to any who are outside of the kingdom of God. In this way, God is the one who joins people to his church. Our responsibility is to reveal, as best we can, the reality to which we are pointing. The benefits of this position are many. It avoids many of the dangers of the other two positions, giving too much importance to the sign of the church such that it can be confused with the kingdom, or giving too little importance to it so that it becomes a value-added extra to a life of personal, private religion. But the drawback is that this kind of symbol is harder to understand and maintain without it being the most important sign in a person's life. No one has to explain to a couple that holds traditional views on marriage that their rings are participatory symbols.

They instinctually understand that. But the church is not this kind of symbol to many Christians in our time, and perhaps in times before. Although we can point to saints and theologians who lived and breathed the church, far more often we are challenged by the occasional attendees. For the church to rightly be the church, it must become the very environment in which a believer lives and moves and has her being. A married couple doesn't spend every moment together, nor does it take over everything in their lives. They retain their individual characters. But marriage is a new context, a new environment, out of which all of life changes. Things that were once important before marriage and children are seriously re-evaluated. Joining the kingdom of God symbolized by the church should be such a life-transforming new environment.

The mission of the church is often largely determined by the kind of symbol we understand the church to be. The first type, the microcosm, sees the mission of the church as being the presence of God on earth, ready with open arms to embrace the world as the kingdom. The mission is to make members, because that's how people join the kingdom of God. Those who reject the authority of the Pope and the church are heretics because they are in rebellion against the kingdom of God.

For the second type, the "merely symbolic," the mission of the church is to support believers in their spiritual walk with the tools they need to do it better, and to convert others to embark on their own life journey with Jesus. The mission may even be seen as "building" God's kingdom as a grand construction project, because responsibility for arbitrary symbols falls upon us.

For the third type, the participatory symbol, the mission of the church is to reveal the kingdom of God to the world, to give the world a taste and sight of what it looks like when God is king. In calling people to repentance it provides a vision of what the life of discipleship looks like among the people of God. This third option, I would argue, is the best understanding of the church and its mission. The church does not have the hubris of thinking it is the kingdom of God, does not exalt the clergy to God's bureaucracy, and impose the kingdom on the world through the institution. But it also does not have the hubris of confusing the work of our hands in building this or that ministry saving the world. It understands that the church does not save anyone or build much of anything at all. God does it all in a way that frees us to participate in his work in the best, but ultimately feeble ways we can

How does the Church Reveal the Kingdom?

There are many ways we can imagine a local church revealing the kingdom of God to the world, and many of these will be contextually dependent. But there are four characteristics of the church that enable it to reveal the kingdom of God.

Redeemed to Holiness

The church as the people of God and a sign pointing to the kingdom of God must be set apart from the world. It must be "redeemed," a word that is often misunderstood. Redemption in Pauline usage often comes from a word "to take out of the marketplace" *exagorazo*. Just as

a redeemed slave is taken off the market as a commodity, so too the church is taken off of the world's market of institutions, communities, and ideas. It must be unique, or it will reveal some aspect of the world to itself. The church is taken off the market and thus acquires the status of "holy" by God taking possession of it. Holiness is often misunderstood as well. Holiness is the quality of a person who has been taken away from a life of normal work and placed in service of the king. When Jesus called Peter to lay down his net, he called him to a holy, rather than a "profane" life of the daily grind. Of course, someone who has long lived a holy life will look very different than the world in behavior. So, we're often confused by thinking that holiness is about behavior. But holiness is about the whole community being set apart for the king, taken out of the kingdoms of the world, like Ur, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome as we see of the people of God in the Bible. If the church is not holy, it does not have its reality grounded in the reality of the kingdom of God, and it will inevitably point to the world.

Holy and Invasive

Holiness is not revelatory if we become so holy no one can see us or talk to us! We must be sent back into the world to reveal the kingdom of God to it. But this missional-invasiveness is predicated on our holiness. If we are not sufficiently mature in Christ as the church, we will inevitably be corrupted by the world. To be a city on a hill, we must have unshakable foundations. That foundation is, of course, Jesus Christ our King. Our identity as a people must be firmly in Christ alone before we are prepared to be missionaries to the world. The church must contextualize its symbols and language, without losing its native language of the kingdom. Put another way, ambassadors of Christ must always be metaphorically bilingual, with our native tongue or home language that of the kingdom. When the church becomes monolingual, it either leaves the world, or is again conformed to the patterns of the world.

Plausible and Tangible

For the church to reveal the kingdom of God, it must reveal something that is plausible. It does no good if the church portrays an impossible superhero-only type of saintliness. For the church to reveal the kingdom of God to the world, it must do so in ways that are plausible to the world. It must reveal the kingdom in some degree of wholeness, touching upon all aspects of life. Merely preaching about the kingdom as some pie-in-the-sky reality does no good. People must taste that pie for the kingdom to be plausible. That means the local church must make the life of discipleship a normal expectation for its people and create contexts in which discipleship does not have to be a constant intentional effort of resisting temptation. Sharing meals, for example, is one basic way the kingdom of God has always been revealed. As people freely share in the chores of meal prep and clean-up, serve one another, talk to one another with respect, love, and candor, the kingdom of God is tasted as a regular reality of life. But a large, irregular potluck doesn't have quite the same effect. There special groups are responsible for clean-up, everyone cooks independently, and the focus becomes the buffet rather than the relationships.

We might say the same for worship events. What kind of reality do they point to and make normal? A worship event that is 40 minutes of music, much of it performed by professionals, with a 15 minute sermon, interspersed with a few prayers and Bible readings, reveals volumes. It reveals a value for quality in performance. It makes the congregation very

aware of their dependence on professionals for kingdom-experiences. It is limited to sight and sound: a spiritual reality seemingly distinct from the fleshly daily life. While there is a place for excellence in music and preaching, this hardly creates a situation in which the kingdom feels plausible, because it remains intangible. It is above the regular person. It is no wonder Christianity has been confused with a religion of the afterlife in which disembodied spirits float on clouds with choirs of angels singing... that is a bit what many worship events feel like. *The kingdom of God is not a spiritual reality (alone). It is the reality of heaven and earth reconciled, of flesh and spirit reunited and made anew.* The kingdom of God, like the king himself, could be touched and felt like Thomas touching the wounds of the risen Jesus. Jesus masterfully revealed the kingdom in himself, as the incarnate God-man, who ate, drank, slept, prayed, fasted, and all the rest in the company of the people of God.

Conclusion

The church is a sign. That means we have a responsibility in rightly pointing at what the sign is designed to point to. But we cannot grow, build, or expand the kingdom of God. God alone can do that. But we can change our normal. We can get together with other disciples of Jesus and ask the big questions, "What areas of our life and church are we fully invested in the marketplaces of the world and so not holy?" And, "How do we together make the kingdom of God plausible and tangible for our context?" And, "What kind of things do we need to make 'normal' for us? What is our 'native language'?" There is both great responsibility and freedom in knowing that God is entrusting us with the sign of his presence. We are responsible for creating contexts. But we are free to create contexts. We are not bound to reveal the kingdom in one particular way, as though God demands right worship events as our one main activity.

What are some ways your church could reimagine itself as a revelator of the kingdom of God? How could you make discipleship normal? What could you do with your facilities, with your events, to both equip the saints to be confident in holiness, well-versed in a new mother-tongue, but also to equip the mature to invade their context with signs of the presence of the kingdom?

Part II: Implications

Five Common Misunderstandings of Church

Adapted from GP Wagenfuhr, *Unfortunate Words of the Bible* (Cascade, 2019)

Introduction

The word “church,” like many other ancient words in regular use over millennia, has gone through many changes in meaning. It is helpful to explore what church often means as we use the word now and compare that to what is intended in Scripture.

Misunderstanding 1: Space—The Church is a Building

Although many readers might have grown up singing, “The church is not a steeple, the church is the people” the reality is, the most ancient use of the word “church” in the Germanic language family (like English), does indeed seem to refer to a church building.¹ But this is never the case in the Bible. The “church” is always an assembly of people, *qahal* in the OT and *ekklesia* in the NT. Latin-derived languages, which were saturated in Christian thought centuries before the Germanic peoples, kept something of this by transliterating the Greek word *ekklesia* into *eglise* (French), and *iglesia* (Spanish). In translating the NT into Latin, St. Jerome decided to keep the Greek word also, calling it *ecclesia*. But after a few generations the definition of church moved from an assembly of people toward a focus on the space where that assembly happened. The building came to stand for, symbolize, and even stand-in for the actual assembly. Thus, by the time the *ekklesia* comes to the Germanic peoples they already think of it as a *kuriakos*, a Greek forerunner to our contemporary English word “church” that means “belonging to a lord.” It is only used in the NT to refer to the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10) and the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:20), never a people or a building.

The language here is not trivial. What we see happen in the history of the church is that the main entity regarded as God’s dwelling (or habitation) shifts from a people to a building. By contrast, Jesus’s followers were called to be the temple of God as they gathered together in his name.² They were filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, in contrast to how God’s Spirit left the temple in Ezekiel. God’s dwelling place, the place where he comes to rest and abide, is the assembly, not a building made by human hands.³ Jesus made a revolutionary claim among all religions, that a people and not a place were filled with God’s presence and power. The power of God could not be contained in a house, but would spread over the whole world as the people themselves did.

¹ See the Kluge, Friedrich, *Etymological Dictionary of the German Language* (1891) at <https://archive.org/details/etymologicaldict00kluguoft/page/174/mode/2up>. Accessed 3 January 2022.

² 1 Corinthians 3:16.

³ See Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:48–50.

Application: If the church isn't the building, then the building is just there to facilitate the mission of the people. If the building doesn't serve the mission, but the mission is constantly being adapted to fit the building or other physical objects, then we've got church backwards. Church buildings can be amazing works of art... but a community that exists to shepherd a work of art is a museum organization. But architecture is formative as well, and constantly swapping buildings for the sake of missional trends, or building multipurpose facilities forms the kind of worship that happens in those locations. *The balance of missional relevance and formation through worship must be regularly assessed, while avoiding the "mission creep" pressure that infrastructure constantly imposes upon us.*

Misunderstanding 2: Time—The Church is an Event

"Worship God at Church on Sunday" was the Sunday School room translation of the Sabbath commandment drawn on the wall at the church I pastored. The building pictured with stick figures had that schoolhouse church look to it. Not only did this picture *enshrine* the first misunderstanding, it also brought in the second: that a specific time is sacred.

When the Old Testament talks about "sanctifying" the seventh day, it uses an active verb. God sanctifies and commands us to sanctify the seventh day.⁴ That is, the Sabbath is not sacred itself, it is something that God wants us to give value to as he does. The act of sanctification does not transmit some ethereal force called "holiness" or "sacredness" from God to a calendar; it is an ancient way of talking about giving something such great value or importance that it is withdrawn from regular "profane" activity. Sanctification turns something common that you could sell for money into an irreplaceable heirloom that we are entrusted with that ultimately belongs to God.⁵

Time, then, is not sacred in itself. Rather, we must sanctify what the time is for—the gathering of the people of God in the presence of God to be conformed to the image of God in Christ.⁶ It is a time to set apart as highly valued where we *worship*, or give worth/value to God. But that doesn't make the event into church. It is simply that relationships exist in time, and to value those relationships is to make time for them and for nothing else.

There are times, however, that we set apart as different and important, like a holiday, and we live in light of its coming, its presence, and its passing. The church calendar has traditionally noted this with seasons, colors, special prayers, special services, and more. Monastic communities traditionally lived each week with the Lord's Day as a holiday. We also value recreational activities and set apart time for them. But there's a third kind of way we value time, and that's by what we devote the bulk of it to. What did Jesus intend the assembly of his followers to be most like—a regular holiday, recreation, or daily life? Or perhaps the answer is

⁴ As in Exodus 20:8 and Nehemiah 13:22.

⁵ Paul talks about this in Ephesians 5:16. In Greek the verb is *ex-agera-zo* which literally means to take something out of the marketplace. In Christ, our time is not for sale, but belongs to him as an heirloom we are entrusted with keeping.

⁶ Romans 8:29.

all of the above, and for that to happen, the assembly of his people would have to involve similar people for the holiday, the recreation, and the daily grind. This is, after all, a *people*.

Church obviously entails events, which involve planning, organization, administration, etc. But the church isn't the event and it isn't an event-coordinating business. The church is the people of God who gather together for worship, discipleship, mission, pastoral care, fellowship... *life*.

Application: The church isn't an event, it's a people that use events of all kinds to facilitate their gathering together in Christ for all the purposes discussed in the Bible. This includes basic things like eating and drinking, working, caring for one another, disciplining each other in discipleship, and worship. Worship events are one component of a healthy expression of the people of God, but should never be confused with the essence of church. Where your church spends most of its effort, finances, and most disagrees shows what is most valued.

Misunderstanding 3: The People

So far we've seen that the church is about the people of God. But this in itself can become a misunderstanding, and an insidious one at that. Scholars who study religion talk about a process called "projection." People invent gods that look like and act themselves (or an idealized version of themselves). Projection makes the people into an idealized god or goddess, forgets that it does so, and sees in that god or goddess a divine mirror of themselves. It's a great way to feel affirmed by the world, something that even modern people desire. Christians aren't immune from this error. But instead of making up new gods to tell us we are great, we are tempted to imagine that the God of the Bible is on our side. This was an error Jesus himself combatted in his day among some Jews who thought their heritage alone made them chosen by God.⁷ When we believe God is for *us as we are*, we turn the gospel in on itself and make it about what God can do for us, because somehow we deserve it. Few people ever say that so boldly, but organizational structures can often reveal such self-idolatry. In church organizations it can manifest itself in the budget, when most funds are spent on providing services to the congregation. It can be seen in churches that believe themselves to be very friendly and welcoming, provided a certain kind of person visits. When tensions rise I've seen it laid bare in statements like, "this is *my* church." It can be seen in gatekeeper roles, preventing certain people entry into what has been turned into a temple building. In all of these instances, the people have become an idol unto themselves and God and his gospel their servants.

The error comes in when we forget both who we are as a people and why we exist as a people. The people of God are called-out and called-together. They are a strange group of wanderers and exiles⁸ who band together in Christ alone. The people of God exist only at the will of God, and for no reason in themselves. And they exist for the mission of God alone. Anytime "the people" or "the congregation" forgets their constitution in Christ or their mission of participating in reconciling all things to God, it will inevitably think God is for them because

⁷ See John 8:33–47.

⁸ Hebrews 11:13.

of who they are or what they do. They will resist calls to repentance if it challenges their core identity.

Application: How do we make church be about the people of God without it being all about the people? The people must take on an identity of *stranger and exile* because they have not arrived, nor has the kingdom of God come in its fullness. Thus, the people of God have to be on the move, not stuck in one identity or one way of doing things. The people is always in flux; what remains constant is Christ. ECO has adopted language of *covenant partnership* in its polity to highlight that being part of this people is to commit to serve rather than simply be served. The culture of a church that has long been focused on providing services to its members can be hard to change. And yet, it is often this inward-looking vision that causes church organizations to grow old and die. Churches can consider, for their next hiring, a Certified Transitional Pastor who is equipped to help a church make such a transition. But change can also begin with an intentional re-envisioning of what it means to be a member, an elder, a pastor, a deacon at your church. Covenant Partner classes are one place to begin reframing expectations.

Misunderstanding 4: The Institution/Organization/Corporation

I have heard numerous pastors voice their concern about the transformation of churches into businesses and lead pastor roles into CEO positions. There are many books warning about the incursion of business thinking into the church from a management perspective and marketing perspective.⁹ Philosophers have been warning against the reign and deceptiveness of management and its myth of effectiveness for generations now.¹⁰ Although business leadership and marketing are particularly modern ways church organizations have looked to the world for inspiration and guidance, it is certainly not a new issue. The ancient church was inspired by a combination of pre-existing Jewish and particularly Roman organizations. The synagogue provided some inspiration for the earliest churches. Later, churches were built as Roman legal buildings, the *basilica*. The architecture here represented a similarity of organizational vision and purpose. Even theology took a significant judicial or forensic turn in the West to match the architecture. Under Christendom, Christ was first and foremost understood as the king of the universe, the *pantocrator*, the all-ruler in heaven, whose order was distributed through human power structures of hand-picked succession. This was a largely static vision in which the world has institutional orders ordained by God. God established offices that people were "called" into as office-holders. At this time in history, churches tended to view their successes in imperial terms: number of parishes, property, people groups included in the church, expansion of control in moral and judicial areas, bureaucratic health, etc.

What we are witnessing in our time is the movement of power from old empires toward corporations. We view success in terms of market share rather than domination of peoples. Thus,

⁹ e.g. Hill, Emily, *Marketing and Christian Proclamation in Theological Perspective* (Fortress Academic, 2021). Shakespeare, Lyndon, *Being the Body of Christ in the Age of Management* (Cascade, 2016).

¹⁰ e.g. Ellul, Jacques, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Cascade, 2016, originally in French 1948).

churches have tended to view their own success in business terms: growth, consumer satisfaction, securing investments, repeat business, subscribers, clicks, and more.

The danger of this identification of the church with the institution is that it legitimizes abuse and corruption that inevitably happens when sinners are seen as vicars of Christ. While it's easy to point fingers historically at Roman Catholic abuses of power, we might want to also consider if we have made the church in the image of the business and fall victim to the dangers inherent in corporations. The corporation's main purpose of existing is to increase the ability of shareholders to do something by distributing the risk. In other words, corporations exist to divest shareholders of personal responsibility or liability, and this in turn enables a multiplication of wealth. When the church is understood like a corporation, it can become an organization that exists for the profit of its members while simultaneously reducing the risk or responsibility of the membership.¹¹ If we think of this spiritually, corporate churches are expected to multiply the spiritual profitability or benefit for its membership while also making sure few of them are exposed to much spiritual risk. In other words, a corporation church should give people what they want while asking as little as possible from them. Discipleship, under such a model, doesn't really make much sense. Consumerism, however, does.

Management, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, with its relentless pursuit of goal-driven effectiveness believes it's only providing neutral tools to aid a group in reaching these goals. But MacIntyre harshly criticizes managers for perpetuating a world in which individual people are transformed into means to some end they have no role in helping define, essentially a situation of society-level servitude.¹²

Technology plays a significant role here as well. Corporations are built on technologies because technology is a form of objective technique. If you do x, y will result, no matter the circumstances. So, offering consumers spiritual techniques is a low-risk way to replace discipleship with a technical simulacra. Lists of "Ten Tricks to Grow Your Church" are examples of *technique*-driven corporate or managerial practices that create spiritual technicians rather than disciples.¹³

Jesus did not intend his church to be modelled after empires or businesses though. Institutions can be useful tools when used judiciously. But when the church begins to be shaped in the image of the world's institutions, rather than fluidly adopting institutional forms to fit certain contexts, the church's mission is transformed unwittingly.

Application: We mistakenly think that the church is the organization when we confuse our denomination or local church 501(c)3 institution with the mission of God. When the survival of the institution takes priority, the church has already left it. When the reputation of the institution matters more than taking a risk for the gospel, the church has been pushed out.

Institutional polity matters. But polity is not the gospel. The church is never the church if the Holy Spirit does not work in and through the people, and this can happen in all different

¹¹ See Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Egypt*, (Cascade, 2016), 225–28.

¹² MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981/2007).

¹³ I've argued that management of humans or God's creation is impossible, and so we have to create simplifications that can be managed through technologies, while destroying complexity and diversity in the process (Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden*. Cascade, 37–50).

kinds of polity. That means it is our responsibility to use a polity that fits our purposes in our contexts. ECO's Polity is designed to help your church maintain accountability structures, connections, and the flexibility to meet the demands of your context. But polity is not intended to be a technique for making the church effective. We cannot manufacture gospel results through techniques, *including prayer*, spiritual practices, or reorganization. But we can do our best to remove all hinderances to our revealing the kingdom of God to the world.

Misunderstanding 5: An Experience

While all of the above misunderstandings have ancient and modern examples, this misunderstanding is particularly modern. "Church" has now become synonymous with a kind of spiritual experience. Consider what the contrast between a cathedral and a modern worship center says about what we think church is. The cathedral is as full of daylight as architecturally possible, the worship center uses only artificial light to be able to achieve total control. The cathedral is shaped like a cross... which is theologically sound but not always that practical for seeing everything that is going on. The worship center is shaped so that all attendees can be laser-focused on the stage. The cathedral's shape allows for multiple rooms with multiple functions all within the cross. The worship center maximizes seating capacity. The cathedral's center is the low altar and pulpit, and at the head of the cross is a high altar. The body of Christ symbolically is present at the heart and the head of the building. The center of the worship center is the stage, again, to which all must face. The acoustics of a cathedral are abysmal for everything but a massive pipe organ. The worship center will be designed to have excellent acoustics, with a sound system perfectly tuned to its space. The cathedral has graves of dead people within it and around it. The worship center has a parking lot around it and only carpet for a floor. We could go on, but the point is that the cathedral makes theological statements everywhere. It is a full-body experience that focuses on the sacrament at its heart. It represents the total life cycle from birth to death, and beyond. It is a constant reminder that the communion of saints includes our forebears. It is a building constructed to imitate the whole cosmos under the reign of Christ with his people in it, much like the temple of Jerusalem. A worship center sweeps all of this away and focuses on the stage, much like a performing arts theatre. Like a stage performance, all aspects of the audience's experience are controlled—sound, light, temperature. While the cathedral was about your role in the cosmos, the worship center is about crafting your spiritual experience by eliminating everything else but the stage. Rather than integrating you into the communion of saints, the worship center takes you out of the world and perhaps your body in a technique-driven musical mysticism.

This experience notion of church is further reinforced by non-Christian use of the word "church." I regularly see people post on Instagram "#dirtchurch" when they are out mountain biking on a Sunday morning. Church is a spiritual experience designed to fill a spiritual need that, for them, is best met by being outdoors.

There are many unintended consequences of providing people a quality spiritual experience on a Sunday morning. One issue here is that an experience of God is being equated with what the church can provide, which largely restricts the presence and experience of God to

the highly orchestrated event run by professionals. Rather than creating spiritually mature disciples, this reinforces an infantile milk-craving. The church becomes a place to meet one's needs rather than a place where growth is expected. For, how can one grow if one's part is merely to experience a performance?

Application: Like it or not, church has been forced into this role of recreational experience by the forces of secularism. Changing this means challenging cultural expectations of what church is. That means finding a careful balance of meeting enough expectations to gain attention and building enough trust to challenge strongly-engrained cultural assumptions. This might mean our "target market" is very different to whom we might expect. The world has no shortage of people in dire need of the good news of Jesus who want more than a passing experience, but a world transformed by a God who demands all of life.

Conclusion: What, then, is The Church?

So, if the church isn't space, time, people, institutions, or experiences, what then is it? The church is the people of God, revealing the kingdom of God, becoming the image of God in Christ, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let's break that down.

People of God: The only source of unity of God's people is God himself. Only God makes his people *his*. And this means the church is God's and God-defined. The people of God go back to Adam and Eve, and nothing they do or do not do make them God's. Humans can rebel, church institutions can fall into heresy and apostasy. But God decides who his people are. God makes a covenant with his people and establishes them as a people, an *ethne*. We must be a true people-group separate from any other *ethnicity*,¹⁴ nationality, or other allegiance. To be part of the people of God means to leave the people of Ur, of Sodom, of Egypt, of Israel, of Babylon, of Rome... God's people are strangers and exiles in any and every nation or identity as we look forward to a city that is not built by human achievement.¹⁵

Ultimately we learn that the people of God is the *body of Christ*.¹⁶ This is an ancient way of speaking, of talking about a king's two bodies: his own physical body, and the body-politic. For ancient and medieval people, these two bodies were inseparable.¹⁷ So it is for Paul in his theology. Not only are we the people of God, we are so because we are joined to God in Christ in a way that incorporates our physical bodies alongside of his. So we suffer together, and fill up what is lacking in Christ's suffering as the extension of his body (politic).¹⁸

Revealing the Kingdom of God: The people of God doesn't exist for its own sake, or even to escape the world. The book of Genesis begins in chapters 1–11 with a long-term prehistory to the children of Abraham. After a span of thousands of years, the pace dramatically slows in

¹⁴ Galatians 3:28.

¹⁵ Hebrews 11:10–16.

¹⁶ Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

¹⁷ See Kantorowicz, Ernst, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton, 1957).

¹⁸ See e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:5–7; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:13.

Genesis 12 with the call of Abram out of his homeland. For what? Genesis 1–11 presents the story of creation suffering because of violence and rebellion against God. Two options are presented: God can destroy the world as in the flood (chapters 6–9), or God can "come down" into human cities and disrupt human beliefs (in chapter 11). The flood and Babel are types of judging activity God can do, but what he chooses to do is form a people to accomplish something the flood and Babel did not do—reconcile all things to himself. So, Genesis 12 sets up the whole of the Bible with Jesus as its high-point. God forms a people for the purpose of being a "blessing to all the peoples of the world." God will bless and not curse, and he will do this through his people. This mission is for the whole people of God, however, and not for institutions. This is a mission God has initiated and God can do through us by revealing what it looks like when God is king of a reconciled people. We cannot *do* God's mission through mission and purpose statements in our local institutions. We can only *participate* in God's mission as a *people*. The people of God have a mission to *reveal* not to *build* the kingdom of God. Only God can do the work, our job is to show God at work. I used to use the language of the "mission of God" or the *missio dei*, but I think there's a big danger inherent in missional language that makes the church *the* tool of God's work, as though our mission is God's mission. The danger of this is that we justify our own missional desires, often based in institutional growth, stability, ministry trends, and fashionable theology, with the notion that we are doing God's work. *Revealing the kingdom* is the mission of God's church. God's mission has a church, yes, but the church's mission is not the exact same as God's.¹⁹

Becoming the Image of God in Christ: Being part of Christ's body as the people of God, we are being conformed to him more and more. Paul, in the book of Romans, carries this as a theme throughout the letter. In Romans 1 he describes the deformations that result from rebellion against God. Sinful behavior is, Paul teaches, the result of imitating the world rather than God. Idolatry is imitation of the images of the world. The "gentiles" or people who aren't following God, are enslaved to imitation of the world. They need to be rescued and see another image to imitate. The people of God must be this "city on a hill" to imitate.²⁰ God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Jesus.²¹ So, our minds are being renewed, away from conforming to the world's images, but being transformed by the Holy Spirit to be like Jesus.²² Good behavior is not a result of moral effort (though it can require that), but by imitating the image. This is meant to happen *together* as a people, a body, not as individuals. The church is not made holy by doing good works. It is made holy by being separated from the world and conformed to be like Jesus, the Holy One, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we can be sent into the world on the mission of God.

Presence of the Holy Spirit: The people of God is the dwelling place of God. God comes-to-rest (Sabbath) in his place-of-rest, his house. God does not live in buildings or any space, but

¹⁹ See my chapter in this book called *The Church's Being and Mission*.

²⁰ To borrow Jesus' phrase!

²¹ Romans 8:29.

²² Romans 12:2.

among his people.²³ It is only by being filled with the Holy Spirit that the people of God are the people of God, able to participate in his mission, and become like Jesus. This means we cannot manufacture church through techniques. We cannot build God a house in stone, in tradition, in corporation, or in spiritual techniques. This means the people of God are a wild people, who are empowered by the Spirit who goes where it wills.²⁴ The people of God are *on the move* as sojourners, migrants, pilgrims, heading towards the reunion of heaven and earth.

Application: What does this mean for church leaders? Are all of our buildings, events, music, session meetings, National Gatherings, and potlucks shackling the Spirit? Not necessarily. All of these things are useful, but they are not themselves the church. How do we keep our priorities straight? Here is where church leaders bear significant responsibility. How do you use your institution and facilities? What are the people of your church becoming, if they did everything you wished they would? Faithful givers and attendees? Missionaries? A whole people who have left every other identity for Jesus? A people who reveal the kingdom of God to your community? A pilgrim people, or a people quite at home in your city or this nation?

I believe we have a lot of work to do in thinking long and hard about how to become a *people*, and from there take practical steps in that direction. Perhaps many of us living now will be part of a wilderness generation when the church has been stripped of its buildings, organizational structures, worship events, holidays, and more. Will we see that as God abandoning us, or as God liberating us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in the wilderness?²⁵

²³ See Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:48–50.

²⁴ See John 3:8.

²⁵ With thanks to Dr. Amy Erickson for this language drawn from her work on Hosea in *Ephraim Radner, Hosean Wilderness, and the Church in the Post-Christendom West* (Brill, 2020).

What and Where is the Church in Society? Social Location Theory

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

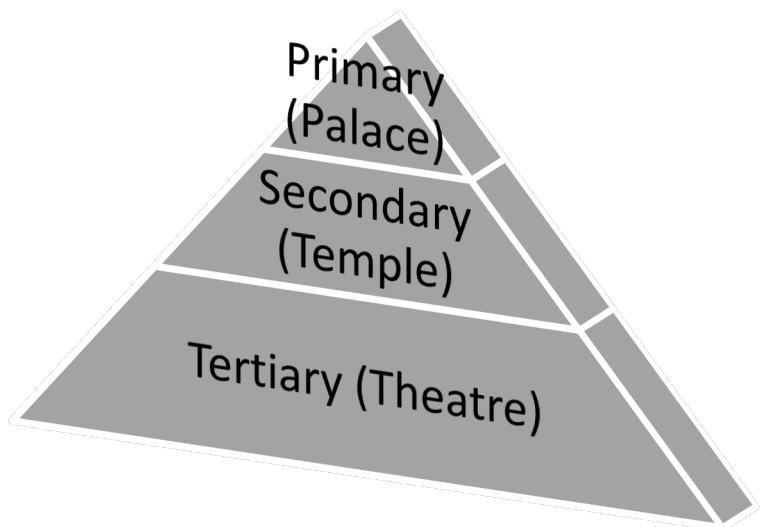
Political division. Declining funding. Loss of moral influence. Aging congregations. The church today faces crises of many kinds that are not always that obviously theological in nature. The church exists in the world. This means part of its reality is one that is defined by the world rather than by our theological convictions. Just as Jesus himself was shaped by being a 1st century Jew living under Roman domination, so too our churches are shaped by the shape of the larger society, and many of the challenges we face are rooted in the pressures of the world, rather than in conscious disobedience.

This chapter proposes a sociological theory that includes the church, but isn't limited to it. What is the church from the perspective of society? And what role does the church play, both now and in history? The results of this theory suggest that Christianity has moved its social location in ways that have predictably led to many of the effects we experience today. What started in houses moved to temples, and has now come to exist in theatres; these locations, symbolically identified by each building, matter deeply.

Social Location Theory of Institutions

The church, from the point of view of sociology, is a social institution. In other chapters of this book you can find solid theological perspectives about why allowing the church to be defined by the world as an institution is wrong. Here, however, we're jumping into the outsider's perspective.

Social institutions like the church, the family, political parties, and corporations occupy a certain place in a social hierarchy. If we consider society as a pyramid with the top being occupied by the *primary community*, we can also identify at least two more distinct sections of that pyramid: the secondary and tertiary. Like any pyramid, the topmost position can only have one space. A society is primarily defined by its primary community. Below this are secondary communities that occupy the middle of the pyramid. Here there is more room for some diversity, and multiple secondary communities exist underneath the primary. Finally, there are many diverse tertiary communities at the base of the pyramid. A person may be the member of only one primary community, usually only



one or two secondary communities, but any number of tertiary communities she has time for.

This pyramid is a description of institutions or communities. Society is not made up of institutions or communities of equal meaning, value, purpose, or importance. Mountain biking is a tertiary community. It is of relatively little value even for most people who are part of the community (apart from those who work in it), at least when compared with family life, work, and politics. But political party affiliation is, for many Americans, firmly a secondary community. It is felt to be more important than many other life activities and identities. Indeed, political affiliation can even break families apart, with children and parents estranged by political differences. In this case, the family has been made tertiary by the secondary community of the modern political party. And above it all lies the primary community. This is almost always the location of the most powerful institution: nation-states. World history is most often written by and about the power-players, the empires,. For the powerful determine profoundly the shape of a person or people group's life.

Institutions are often represented by buildings, as they often have characteristic architecture. The primary community is typically symbolized by a palace. Secondary communities tend to traditionally take temple-like shape. Temples themselves are often modelled on palaces in the first place, though. So we find that educational institutions often employ similar architecture to palaces and temples: grand buildings with turrets, spires, classical columns, and more. Finally, tertiary communities take the shape of theatres. Now, theatres are very diverse and we should include any type of entertainment building here, like stadiums, art galleries, and performing arts centers. Their architecture obviously fits the need of the type of activity they house. Each of these buildings house something. The palace houses power and authority, distributing it throughout the community. The temple houses the gods, channeling divine blessing to the community and providing space for the community to be shaped by common ritual. And the theatre houses performers who give space for life to lived apart from normal social power relations.

As we'll see, institutions can occupy different spaces of this pyramid at different periods of history. And as they move down the pyramid (for it's almost always a downward direction), their architecture changes as well. Our task is to describe these communities, what defines them, and ask where the church belongs, and what that means.

Primary Community/House and Palace

The primary community is almost always the state in our times. The primary community is that which makes a people a coherent unit. It is the basic identifier of a people. So, Americans are the people who are citizens or subjects of the rule of the American government institution. This is symbolized by the White House. The same can go for many other nations. We have *capital* cities (from Latin meaning *head*), that are as much the source of identity and direction as the head is of a person.

The primary community has the unique right to kill, imprison, confiscate property, grant and restrict freedoms, and those who are part of this community will generally accept these matters as normal and right. Justice is defined and arbitrated by the primary community, and so

too are the values that are enshrined in the halls of justice. The primary community has its hand in shaping most aspects of an individual's life. Even tertiary communities like professional sporting leagues are "national."

But the palace is inaccessible to average people. In spite of the Enlightenment idea that we participate in government through voting, the reality is almost none of us can do much to change the course of the nation, or to voice our unique opinions directly to the halls of power. Instead, we need mediators.

Secondary Community/The Temple

The secondary community are the communities that hold access to the halls of power. As noted above, in America we have political parties. It is almost impossible to be elected to government office without declaring oneself a Democrat or Republican in American politics. But both are equally American, even if they would each define what "America" means in different ways. Indeed, their whole reason for being is to influence the shape of the primary community by getting their people elected to office. But there are also major corporations and lobby groups, like "Big Oil" and "Big Tech." It is very possible to shape the identity of America as an oil executive or leader of a social media corporation. Secondary communities do not have to be restricted to nations, of course. Many are international, but still must seek to make an impact by engaging in specific primary communities, as Freemasons did in the 18th and 19th century, international workers associations did in the early 20th century, and now as identity groups do. These modern identity communities are based in race, gender, sexual orientation, and more. LGBTQ is an acronym for a community that has intentionally organized and banded together to influence the political shape of primary communities across the world.

This clues us into another major feature of secondary communities. They are almost always coalitions of diverse people with diverse agendas banding together to achieve some shared goods or goal. But coalitions do not leave anyone unchanged. LGBTQ is a useful community to talk about because its very name is a coalition of diverse peoples. The reasons why someone might identify as lesbian could be very different to a biological man who identifies as a trans-female, and they may not always get along. Indeed, they may have significant problems with each other. Their unity comes from a shared political desire, not because they are the same.

And so we see the first obvious implication of our theory of social location. If a secondary community manages to achieve its political ambitions, it often disbands in fighting. The more the LGBTQ community achieves political acknowledgement from the primary community, the less reason it has to exist as a coalition, and will eventually disband. They are comrades in arms, not necessarily peacetime friends.

The temple was, prior to the advent of secularism, almost universally the building that symbolized a secondary community. This was true of ancient empires, and true of Christendom. It was also true, to some extent, of America until the 1960's and Europe until WWI, which had churches modelled after traditional temple ideas, like having a central altar where sacrifices and offerings would be made. 20th century church architecture often broke with tradition in many

ways, but retained the essential feature that made it a church: a sacred space whose center was a table of sacrifice toward which all attention was directed. Temples are, in many ancient cultures including the ancient Hebrews, the "house of God." This is the primary term the Old Testament uses to describe the temple. The "house" part of this is really a "big house" or palace. Ancient temples housed the gods in a manner very similar to kings, with a guarded throne room. The Temple of Jerusalem has similar architecture to palaces also, with various courts reserved for people of various social standing, and the Holy of Holies being the throne room of God, the throne being the Ark of the Covenant. It was the meeting place of heaven and earth through which power and blessing flowed to the nation.

But in these cultures, including Israel under the kings, the temple was a secondary building to the palace. David first secured the peace of Israel, then built himself a grand palace, then felt guilty that God still lived in a tent and decided to build a temple.¹ Of course God prevented him through Nathan, but gave that task to Solomon, who did build a temple. He then immediately built himself a palace grander than David's.²

Temples exist to harness the power of the divine and channel it in official ways to the palace. Although pagan temples worshipped illusions, temples were effective in securing the loyalty and wealth of a people and transferring it to the palace. Indeed, many ancient temples were the storehouses of a city's treasure that could only be rightly plundered for some civic crisis. Temples held the wealth of a people in trust, as it were. Again, it's not accidental that banks traditionally (picture Wall Street) have classical architecture motifs recalling something of Greco-Roman temples. Wall Street even has its golden bull idol as a god enthroned!

There also exists a fair amount of diversity among temples or other secondary communities. Rome had a pantheon of the gods, but in New Testament times, all—save the Jews—were required to make sacrifices to Caesar's *genius* (a spirit representing Caesar himself). So, the diversity of gods served the same essential function of orienting a people and their power to the throne of the empire. Or consider some other Old Testament stories, like that of Daniel. Daniel refused to submit to the state religion, but Nebuchadnezzar eventually permitted religious diversity after Daniel's miraculous survival from the lions. So long as all upheld his rule and worshipped him (i.e. honored him as supreme), Nebuchadnezzar would allow Jews to worship Yahweh. He did not *convert* to Yahwism, but he permitted it to be practiced.

Thus we see another implication of the idea of social location. The primary community can increase those over whom it rules by transforming smaller rival communities into tributaries. So the Persians decided that it would be an empire of tribal diversities and tributaries whose greatest minds and leaders would be trained in Persia. The Jews were permitted to go home, but they were not free. In our time, the very *celebration* of diversity is a tacit legitimization of the unity that permits diversity to be tolerated or celebrated. As the Jews realized during the Second Temple Period, being a secondary community of an empire, whether Persia, the Greek empires, or the Romans, is certainly not freedom. Freedoms given by the primary community are often giving back some "rights and liberties" after all freedom has been taken away. True freedom is

¹ See 2 Samuel 7.

² See 1 Kings 7:1–12.

not given or granted. Thus, for a nation to give freedom to a people is for that people to become servants or tributaries.

Tertiary Community/The Theatre

Temples sometimes morph into entertainment or recreational institutions. This happens when a secondary community becomes tertiary. Tertiary communities are voluntary associations. They exist to add value, not to make demands. Most of our recreational behaviors and associations are of this kind. They aren't really coalitions, but groups of people who band together around a common love of something that provides some personal benefit. They aren't looking to change the world, but to escape some aspect of it for a time.

Whereas temples exist to channel power from the people to the primary community, theatres exist to keep the power of the people from growing too great: "Bread and circuses" as the Roman Empire famously practiced.³ Theatres provide a form of association directed away from making changes in the real world. In classical drama theory, the philosopher Aristotle spoke about how theatre provided *katharsis*, or cleansing of emotions by experiencing them vicariously through drama.⁴ This is a word heavy with religious background. Catharsis was first a kind of ritual purification. Recreation now transformed a cleanness before the gods into a psychological renewal. The first theatre in the classical tradition was the temple of Dionysus, with dramatic reenactments of divine stories that eventually came to focus on the playwright's take on a classical story and the actors' performance than it did on priests engaging in religious practices.

Theatres are temples turned in on themselves. They come about when a people begin to use the gods to worship themselves and other people. The performance for the gods on stage eventually becomes a performance for the audience. But this introduces a problem. If theatres exist to provide some value-add to a person's life, they lose the temple's capacity to build a community through coalitions, and they have to focus on pleasing the audience. This leads, eventually, to a great diversity of recreational experiences whose very diversity and experience-focus means they cannot create broad unity. Temples are about service to the gods. Theatres are about service to the people.

This begins to show in the architecture, as all attention moves toward the talent, who must be excellent in themselves. The first thing to go out of the temple that turns it into a theatre is the altar. As with many modern church sanctuaries, they can become almost immediately (or already are) theatres by the removal of the altar, baptismal font, and pulpit. In the theatre, the artist is the gift of the gods to the people, "idols." They have to perform with originality, not be a nameless priest performing for the gods. This makes the theatre institution rather fragile, since it relies on continually pleasing the crowd who are changeable, rather than the gods who are less so. Thus, theatres are constantly reinventing themselves.

How does an activity-based community like trail running fit into this? The tertiary community allows people to join with minimal requirements, and yet it offers some positive psychological and physical benefit to the individual. Much recreation exists to help people cope

³ Juvenal, *Satires* X.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b28.

with the harsh reality of regular life in which individuals feel little ability to make an impact on the world of the primary community. Recreation empowers individuals in imaginary and strictly limited sub-worlds to make an impact while in the primary community they make almost no difference. Outdoor recreation in modern times has turned the natural world itself into a grand theatre—a gift of the gods to us for our pleasure (especially national parks), whereas before the wilderness was a threatening place and not often enjoyed for its own sake before the 18th century.

An Example: The Family

The family is a basic social institution attested throughout all of written history. Its forms have varied significantly, but the notion of a kinship network into which children are born has remained a major fixture of human history. But (to make a large and sweeping generalization of human history after the advent of agriculture) we can see that the family began as the primary community, was subjected to city and state control, became secondary with the rise of empires, and finally in our time has become tertiary.

The house is the natural picture of the family, for it is historically the place where much of life occurred, including conception, birth, and death. The family in the form of a tribe or clan functioned as the primary identity, with no higher human power to dominate it. An incredible diversity of social forms of the primary community family existed, but we are most familiar with Old Testament pictures of it in the patriarchy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The primary family housed justice, economics, religion, and more. The stories of Genesis, of Jacob working for Laban to essentially purchase his wives, Rachel stealing the household gods from her father, the favoritism of one wife over others, the large extended household that these patriarchs commanded, are all wonderful portrayals of one particular expression of the family as primary. Sex and reproduction were tightly controlled by the family, again as seen by Jacob and Laban, but also with Abraham's need of an heir.

Jacob and Esau's relationship also show many of the tensions that arise in such a family. Sibling rivalry is today confined mostly to play, but for them it was a serious matter about who would become a tribal chieftain by inheritance. When families separated or when tribes met other tribes, they were foreigners and treated as dangerous equals. We're familiar with what tribal wars often look like: vendettas and cycles of vengeance, tense stand-offs with limited skirmishes. Think of the Hatfields and McCoys, or the Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*.⁵

But with the rise of cities in which people from different tribes began living in close proximity, the family went through radical changes in all of its aspects. Marriage customs changed. The primary community was no longer the tribe, but the city. The city gave identity. The city was the context in which economic and political life now took place. One's primary

⁵ As always with sociology and anthropology, these are great generalizations and there are many examples of tribes who practiced great hospitality and who paid victims of crime to prevent cycles of vengeance. Nevertheless, those who practiced *wergild* payments did so to the family of the victim of murder, thus reinforcing the primacy of the family.

group of compatriots and competitors were no longer siblings, but fellow *citizens*. The family became secondary, and many shrewd politicians⁶ intentionally redefined tribal affiliations and identities so that families were made to serve the good of the city rather than the city serve the interests of families.⁷ Religion was moved from the household to the city as well. Although household gods remained popular throughout pagan history, it was the urban gods who were housed separately in temples with special priesthoods. Many cities were founded around sacred sites and took on the names of their gods or goddesses, like Athena of Athens. Urban religion aided the city rulers in forging a new identity apart from blood-based kinship networks. Nevertheless, the family often remained the most powerful sub-group in a society. We know the names of these major clans in European history: the Medicis, the Hapsburgs, the Tudors, and many more. These aristocratic families competed for supremacy in the primary community by placing their family members in positions of power, including in the papacy and other church appointments. Sexuality and reproduction were reframed again by the family becoming secondary. Urban families tended to be smaller. Married women in many ancient urban societies, like Greece, were not permitted out of the house alone or unveiled. Monogamy made a lot more sense than polygamy in a place where children were not significant contributors as farmhands or shepherds, especially among the working class. Marriages could now take place for political reasons outside of a kinship network, rather than often within larger kinship groups.

For much of Western history, the family has been in some flux between primary and secondary community. At times when civil authority was great, the family took a secondary role. For feudal European peasantry, the family took on more importance in their small villages of few families. The rapid industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century led to a large breakdown in the family. As industry moved from the cottage and family farm to the factory, men, women, and children all left their homes to go to work for someone else. The family home, where it existed, was merely a retreat for the few hours when the people were not at the factory. The family started to become more and more a tertiary community, as employment for corporations in factories replaced the house, village, or town as the major context in which people spent their lives. Thus it was in the 20th century that the family saw continued demotion to tertiary status. The modern nuclear family was and remains a largely suburban phenomenon for those middle-class people with enough means to retreat from the city and create a haven where family and home was a respite—i.e. recreation. This retreat mentality of the home is a particularly modern phenomenon⁸ that reveals how the family has become tertiary. When the family was a primary or secondary community, the house was not a retreat, but an extended network of relations through whom you advanced in all aspects of life. For us today, "networking" is far more important than making sure you're the favorite of a wealthy grandparent. There are few family businesses, and we look at attempts to get family members better deals or special appointments in places of power as "nepotism" and corruption.

⁶ A word that derives from the Greek *polis*, meaning city.

⁷ In Athens, Cleisthenes (ca. 508 BC) created a set of ten tribes that each had an urban, coastal, and inland section assigned to it which were named after some local hero. These "tribes" played various functions in Athenian political life.

⁸ For the middle-class. For the aristocracy having second homes has been normal since at least Roman times.

As the family has become tertiary, it has also become recreational. Not that family life is always joyful, but previously the family was never a choice. Today, marriage is optional and singleness is not generally a social barrier. Sexuality and reproduction are consumer choices. Although prostitution, adultery, and infanticide are ancient, the reasoning behind those actions fit their primary or secondary contexts. So, ancient Sparta practiced infanticide as a civic affair. Every Spartan infant was presented to the city elders to determine if it should live or die. The tertiary family (or non-family) practices abortion according to private lifestyle choices. Reliable contraception is a 20th century invention that has majorly influenced the movement of the family toward tertiary status by reframing sexuality as an individual right and choice performed for the sake of constructing individuality rather than as an expression of procreative family-building. In other words, sexuality and reproduction has moved out of the family and the city, and has become largely recreational. As a secondary community, the family's duty was to procreate. As a tertiary community, the family does what it wants. People choose to have children now. That is one of the most revolutionary ideas in human history. And it is one that will mean the family, if it endures, will only do so as a value-add voluntary association. The consequences of this are clear—sex becomes an end in itself practiced for personal pleasure and the right to do whatever one likes sexually is lauded by many. It also means the primary community has taken over many formerly family-based functions, like education. Public education arises as the family falls.

The Primary Church

Talk about the church has been conspicuously absent so far. But we can see that it follows a similar trajectory as the family. In the Old Testament, the people of God was cast as a primary community through God's covenant with Abraham. God would be the God of this people group, and they would be known by his name and reputation. Jesus makes numerous statements showing how he considered his followers a primary community. They were to forsake the family to follow him.⁹ They had to forsake serving money to follow him.¹⁰ They sometimes had to leave their family businesses to follow him.¹¹ Jesus even renamed many of his followers in an act that shows his lordship and their new identity within this new primary group, just as God had given Abram, Sarai, and Jacob new names.

The early church was initially a primary community. It met in *houses*. Many sold everything they had and lived a common life, treating the church as a new family group. Early Christians refused to give their allegiance to Caesar, because that would be to submit Christ to Caesar as Lord. Caesar's demand that Rome be primary was rejected because the church was primary. Even the Jew-Gentile troubles of the early church can be seen as a question of whether the church would become the primary community, or remain secondary to the Jewish community. Paul's radical statement of Galatians 3:28 is the clearest demonstration of his belief that the church was primary over the family, the ethnic, and the economic worlds. But Paul also says that

⁹ Luke 14:26.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

¹¹ As with the fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. See Matthew 4:18–22.

the church should decide its own legal cases, that justice belonged to that community and should not be given to another, like Rome.¹²

The family and sexuality are also radically reformed by Jesus and Paul's teachings. Jesus taught that there will be no marriage in the resurrection.¹³ Paul taught that singleness was preferable in many ways to marriage,¹⁴ a teaching that would be shocking in its Roman and Jewish contexts where the family was a major secondary institution through which people found meaning, advancement, security, and purpose. So basic was the family to the Roman imagination that the emperor called himself the *pater familias* (father of the family) of the whole empire. So, when Jesus says, "call no man 'father' on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven"¹⁵ he is at once redefining the family while simultaneously subverting loyalty to the Roman emperor. For Paul, the whole notion of the family and sexual union was turned on its head. These now were symbolic of the reality of Christ and his people, the church.¹⁶ Now, Paul did not believe that the time had come for everyone to abandon human sexuality or family life. They would continue until Christ returned, but these were to be made secondary to the primary community of the church. The family should serve the church just as the family was then serving the Roman Empire.

The head of the church is God, "Our Father in heaven," who also is the one who ought to provide our "daily bread." Rome had established a regular grain dole by 123 BC, with monthly distributions of free or below-market grain. "*Pater Kaisaros*" was the one who gave Romans their daily bread. Jesus was not only the "bread of life" he also commanded his disciples to "seek first his kingdom" and all the daily necessities of life would be provided for, as Caesar did for his people.¹⁷

Provision, redefining the family, internal justice, along with direct counter-imperial claims all go to show that the New Testament's vision of the church was clearly as the primary community for the people of God over whom God was the king of a royal household.

The Secondary Church

This all changed within a few generations. By the time of Constantine the church was fully controlled by Gentiles. Constantine's recognition and favoritism of Christianity transformed what was primary into a thoroughly secondary institution. The church had already started moving out of houses with their agape meals and into temples with renewed clergy, sacrifices, and a vision of Christ as the far-away *pantocrator* or all-ruling emperor of the heavens. The recognition of the church by the empire and later its elevation to official religion meant that the church existed to serve the state. Christ was pushed into heaven where his specialist clergy couldn't much meddle in the affairs of state, except to bless them and sometimes speak prophetic words. Jesus became

¹² 1 Corinthians 5:12, 6:2–3.

¹³ Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:35.

¹⁴ see 1 Corinthians 7.

¹⁵ Matthew 23:9.

¹⁶ Ephesians 5:22–33.

¹⁷ Matthew 6:25–33.

a spiritual Lord who did not compete for allegiance with the earthly lords, but sovereignly delegated his power through them. Early church architecture bears witness to this in many ways. As expected, most early churches were fashioned after Roman legal and civic buildings—the basilica. The architecture put in stone-form what the people believed about the social location of God and his people. Heaven and earth met in the temple-church building, and from there flowed out to the palace for the common good of the empire.

With the fall of the western Roman Empire and the division of Europe into smaller political units, the church enjoyed new power as the dominant political power that could provide unity across fiefdoms, while also providing major social services like education, healthcare, and poverty relief. This meant that the church regained something of its primacy. We see in figures like the archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket (1119–1170) the constant struggle of the church against the crown for the right to rule itself as an independent body and so maintain some form of primacy. This failed for Becket who was murdered at the altar by the knights of King Henry II. And this bid at primacy failed in the long run for the Roman Catholic Church globally.

The Reformation significantly aided the state in regaining its primacy over the church. Luther bought his reforms at the cost of selling the church to the state, once again making the church a secondary institution that existed to provide divine support for the rulers of the state. The Augsburg Settlement (1555) promulgated the concept of *cuius regio, eius religio* or "whose realm, his religion." This specifically attached religion to the various princedoms of the Holy Roman Empire. Religion was secondary to earthly powers. The same can be seen in England with Henry VIII (reigned 1509–1547) whose rejection of papal authority created the Church of England whose official head is the king or queen of England. Church property became crown property in the English Reformation. Again, this brought reform to the church at the cost of selling any claim to primacy it had had in the middle ages.

The long-term effect of the Reformation has been a movement toward religious tolerance and secularism. Religious tolerance is the euphemistic way of describing the demotion of the church and its claims to truth. Religious tolerance not only makes Christianity a temple-religion focused almost exclusively on claims of heavenly power and promises for the afterlife, it also effectively makes the state into a god, as happened in Rome and is visible in many totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. There was a profound irony when Stalin, leader of an anti-religious regime, declared that "Communism is sacred." Lenin and Mao were made as much gods after their deaths as any Caesar was.¹⁸ Secondary community religion restricts its truth claims to areas that do not impact the governance of the state—and states continually grow in ambition to claim ever more of human life as their prerogative. The reason Christianity transformed into a primarily heaven-hell salvation-afterlife religion, which does not do exegetical justice to the full sweep of Scripture, was that the church was limited to speaking about a "spiritual" kingdom of God rather than a physical one. This is a type of allegorization of older myths that we can trace even in ancient Greek religion as it was transformed into theatre.

Once the church had been made officially secondary in the form of national churches, the inevitable result would be the opening of religious diversity tolerated or celebrated within a state. For, if a state can forge a national identity separate from any single religion, it creates a

¹⁸ See Ellul, Jacques. *The New Demons* (1975).

broader peace and tax-base, as well as the ability to posture itself as a liberator of people from the nightmares of religious war. Ironical, again, is that people like French president Emmanuel Macron could say that "Secularism never killed anyone"¹⁹ when the French Revolution massacred its own people in the name of secularism. Secularism *must become sacred*, and in so doing displace all other claims to sacrality.²⁰

The Tertiary Church

Once religious pluralism is enshrined, as happened in the US Constitution, it severs the tie between the temple and the palace. Although this severing has taken centuries to work its way out, we are now seeing the church, stripped of any social power, transformed into a tertiary community. Religious pluralism redefines religion, transforming it into a form of recreation. Its truth claims are now strictly limited to the sphere of personal life and secondary or tertiary community gatherings.

When the primary community severs its tie to specific secondary communities, it cuts off the ability for the secondary communities to make an impact on social life from their particular perspective. If religion is not allowed in public debates, it means that religious affiliations cannot be a means of forming a coalition to make an impact on the primary community. Instead, religious groups have to turn their ideas into generic principles stripped of reference to God or Jesus, that should be able to be rationally grounded in values common to the primary community. Where a medieval king might change his laws based on input from the pope who might appeal to the authority of Scripture, a modern president seeks to find shared values among a constituency without having to refer to God or his representatives.

Put another way, if primary-community Christianity was a *household* that one joined, and secondary-community Christianity was a heaven-based *religion* of the afterlife, tertiary-community Christianity is now a *spirituality* that focuses on adding value to the psychological well-being of individuals. The church is now a theatre that talks more about what God can do for you than what God demands of you. The concept of "spiritual, not religious" reveals that society views what Christianity has to offer as something non-institutional and deeply personal.

That church institution has become a theatre can be seen in almost every aspect of normal American church life. The architecture has moved toward theatres. Its main event is not a sacrifice to the God in heaven to secure his favor for the common good of the nation, as with the temple. The altar has been removed and replaced by performers. Its main event is essentially a blend of concert and motivational speech. It has become an *experience* one has on a Sunday. The "community" of the church is akin to the mountain biking community in that it shares a common recreational interest. It is no longer the privileged society-building community that the secondary/temple church engaged in. Nor is it the long-lost totally new people group formed by an exodus from the world that the primary church of the New Testament was.

¹⁹ In a tweet from October 31, 2020.

²⁰ I argue this point more fully in "Jacques Ellul and Charles Taylor on the Sacrality of Secularism" in *Political Illusion and Reality*, eds. Gill and Lovekin (Pickwick: 2018).

The result of the church becoming a tertiary institution is that it has no access to social power without joining a secondary community coalition. Thus, as the church lost its social power in the 1960's it sought to regain it through coalitions like the 1980's Moral Majority. Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism both can be seen as types of this coalition strategy that sought new common ground among Christians of various traditions to gain enough social influence to impact political policy. Although somewhat successful in the early 20th century, later on these coalitions alone did not have enough clout to make an impact alone. They needed to find allies outside of their ranks. Coalitions, as we saw, however, come at a steep cost. The cost of joining a moral coalition was God himself. For the church in America and its God never was the primary community. Instead, Christians seek access to the influence of secondary communities and their lobbyists by giving up what makes them uniquely Christian. In order to form a coalition we must accept an alliance with people who deny our belief in God for the sake of some social good. Coalitions are the devil's deal because they give us power by changing our allegiance.²¹ They make God the means to some social end, rather than every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord/King.²²

For the church to regain some semblance of social impact it once had in the Western world, it has to join coalitions with those who deny the very heart of the historic Christian faith. This was precisely the temptation Judah faced in the Old Testament when they were threatened with destruction by Assyria. They forged an alliance with Egypt, only to see Assyria put Egypt to shame, as happened also with Babylon.²³ The alliance would do nothing to address the heart of the matter: that Judah had abandoned God. Their alliance with Egypt only showed forth their unbelief as they turned to pragmatic solutions to fix their immediate needs. These alliances were both a spiritual failure and a national-strategic one. But it was a lesson that was not remembered forever. When the Jews finally had their own sovereign nation once again, without paying tribute to any other nation under the Hasmoneans, political infighting led to a request that the Romans, the new empire on the block, offer aid, which they did in 63 BC, and Israel was never free again. Strategic alliances are, by nature, against the purpose God has for his people.

Tertiary communities exist to serve the people. They are, by nature, consumerist. We may today lament the consumerism present in our church congregations. It's not the fault of churchgoers intentionally choosing rebellious attitudes. The social location of the church in America necessitates that it be a consumer-driven value-add service provider. Certainly we have our minority of enthusiastic volunteers, but so too do other tertiary communities. I could help build and maintain local trails too, and be sold-out for the good of my town's outdoor recreation facilities. I could do both, if trail maintenance days don't happen to fall on Sunday mornings, which they often do. Children's sports are another classic example here.

Tertiary churches are those that have lost nearly all of their formerly essential functions. The rise of parachurch ministries coincides directly with the transition of the church from secondary to tertiary. Non-profit organizations are by their nature fairly specialized. They have distinct missions because they have to encourage people to give funding for what they believe

²¹ As we see exactly in Satan's temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:10 and Luke 4:8.

²² Philippians 2:9–11.

²³ See Isaiah 19–30, Ezekiel 17:11–21.

to be worthwhile. As voluntary associations, they have to be both appealing and make an appeal. But the old temple churches were large organizations that were capable of many diverse activities whose existence was not predicated on articulating a clear mission. As parachurch ministries have arisen, they have, like it or not, diverted funding from the church, even as they performed specialized ministries the church was then failing to do well. The church was left with a narrow range of core activities, mainly Sunday worship, and sometimes pastoral care. With the major transition toward online church during COVID, many churches are threatened with obsolescence as there are no longer any services desired of the institution that they can provide better than others. The natural result of this is to engage in mission-creep by repurposing facilities, making income through other streams, and generally trying to find creative ways of making money to keep the institution afloat. The danger of this tactic is that it turns the church from a theatre into a museum.²⁴ What is left after a church has become a museum? In my own experience, the elderly ladies' quilting group is the last surviving expression of a congregation that disbanded 5 years ago. The building remains and is making money as a place for community activity, exactly what it was built in 1900 to do, except without God. In other words, the building and institution do not need God, the sacraments, or worship music to be sustainable today. It just needs to provide services that appeal to the community, like Christmas concerts and a wedding and funeral venue.

Implications for the Church

The church was always intended to be a primary community. Jesus did not intend his claim to lordship to be confined to the realm of religion or private spiritual journeys. Jesus would not have been killed for encouraging people to be more spiritually healthy, or even if he were only trying to reform the Jewish religion. The Jewish community in Jesus' day was diverse with many competing voices and ideas for what it meant to be Jewish and what Jews should believe. The Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes were not in the habit of getting each other killed in political show trials, even if they didn't much like each other. Jesus was killed as a political threat to Rome, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."²⁵ Jesus' claim to kingship was a claim to lead a primary community that was, by nature, a rebellion against Caesar and the Herodian dynasty. So we have the Christmas story of the slaughter of the innocents when Herod killed the infant boys of Bethlehem.²⁶ Again, if Jesus was prophesied to be some religious reformer or wise spiritual guru, Herod would have felt no threat. Nor would the Magi come to do obeisance before a child future-reformer whose religion they did not share.

Christianity as a temple religion is subverted by the state. It pushes Jesus and his church into the far-off heavens to delegate his authority to the emperors and kings who seek to lord it

²⁴ This has been my exact experience in launching a church conservancy organization to care for the church I had to close.

²⁵ John 19:12, ESV.

²⁶ Matthew 2:16.

over one another, as disciples of Jesus do not do.²⁷ God, who sits in heaven, mocks the hubris of these petty humans who claim such greatness that they try to submit God's Messiah to their fragile power. God promises to crush them with a rod of iron, and dash them to pieces like a clay pot.²⁸ There is no sense in trying to regain what was already a long-subverted situation of the temple church in Christendom. Yes, there was a measure of social power, a social power not unlike that of a Daniel, exiled from his homeland, made to serve a king who subjected his whole people to death, destruction, exile, and servitude. Daniel is a hero, but he is also what would today be considered a victim of human trafficking. Daniel was also a tool for Babylon to achieve its ends. The temple church is a captive church with a captive God, imprisoned in a house made to look like a throne room, chained to an altar where he can dole out the benefits of his power to those who make the right bargains and offer the right kind of worship.

But Christianity as a tertiary community is untenable. Theatre church, like the theatre of Dionysus, will not last long. It will constantly try to praise the excellence of performers who ostensibly are pleasing God with their honeyed voices, while really speaking words that please a consumer audience. Funding depends on pleasing people and meeting their spiritual desires. Theatres are almost always out of date, because popular forms of entertainment are ever shifting. Theatre churches will constantly bow to the budget, and ever be in search for the next great "best practice" that will effectively communicate a message. Theatres are also by their very nature not able to command loyalty, nor do they form robust communities apart from among the producers and performers (i.e. pastors, volunteers, and employees). The methods of loyalty and community formation come through branding, marketing, and mission statements. These methods in themselves turn people into means to further ends, thus preventing theatre churches from providing serious pastoral care. Indeed, many church pundits now advocate abandoning visitation and pastoral care for the sake of strategy. While mission is valuable, there is a massive danger in the missional conversation that makes the people of God little more than a method or strategy. The church is not God's HR department.

We also shouldn't miss that the gospel that is preached in these three communities is very different.

The primary community gospel is, "prepare ye the way of the Lord," "take up your cross and follow me," "repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," "there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ," and "you cannot serve two masters" among many other statements of course. This is a gospel about the arrival of the king who is reconciling heaven and rebellious earth, who is entrusting and empowering his followers with his Spirit, to continue the work of being the people of God with the mission of reconciliation. The big question of this gospel is, "Whose side are you on?"

The secondary community gospel is that God has made the world as it is, that his sovereign will is expressed through social hierarchies and castes, and our duty is to integrate and join the mission of building a progressing world through the alignment of human and divine power. Life is hard, but if we do well we will be rewarded in the afterlife. In other words, the gospel is a moralistic command to integrate into the world as it is, with the hope of delayed

²⁷ Matthew 20:25–28, Mark 10:42–44.

²⁸ Psalm 2.

gratification after death. This produces a gospel that answers the major question, "Do you know where you are going after you die?" A question the Bible never asks and has a very hard time answering with any single clear proof-text.²⁹

For the tertiary community, the gospel is immediate gratification. Sin is a form personal brokenness and victimization that spiritual therapies/disciplines can rectify to give you your "best life now" or help you "flourish" and be "more fully human." Christianity can aid the common good of city, a clear picture of a tertiary community posturing itself as ripe for coalitions. Jesus can offer freedom from the power of addiction, of broken relationships, and other social ills that beset our personal lives. While of course there is truth in those statements, they focus on the effects of the gospel rather than the gospel itself—the kingdom of God. And in trying to offer the effects of the reign of Christ when "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him,"³⁰ we are in danger of offering a simulation of the kingdom without the need of appealing to the real Jesus and his sharp political and economic edges.

From a purely financial point of view, the church as tertiary community is an unsustainable business model. The sustainability of the temple or secondary community church is rooted in its ties to the state. State churches often receive funding through obligatory tithes—a temple tax. Now it is constantly fundraising, but without a clearly articulated reason for being akin to parachurch organizations like Young Life or Compassion.

Application to the Tertiary Church: A Call

The power of a sociological analysis like the one offered in this chapter is that it both lets us off the hook morally and gives us the ability to ask serious questions about the future of the church without blaming one another, or blaming this or that theologian or church leader. Certainly we're all morally complicit in a lack of discipleship. But it's not that we've all consciously chosen idolatry. Many or most of us have done our level best for Jesus, and things seem to be crumbling around us anyway. Here we are living in a declining church that has lost its power, has a strong memory of the good old days of the temple when robes, big choirs, organs, sanctuaries, were respected, when people stood for the reading of Scripture, not for the performance of a soloist.

The call of Jesus doesn't change, nor does *his* gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ is that he is the rightful king of all things,³¹ but one against whom the world is presently in rebellion as it is ruled by the usurping powers subject to Satan, including the power of death.³² We believe

²⁹ The "paradise" Jesus promises in the cross to the thief in Luke 23:43 is often interpreted as "heaven" in a disembodied location of bliss. But this misses the rich biblical connection to Eden. For a *pardes* is a loanword from Persia and it refers to palace gardens, which the LXX uses for the garden of Eden. More difficult still is the seemingly competing notion that Jesus descended to Sheol/the dead, and preached to the captives there as the Apostles' Creed says based on 1 Peter 3:19. So, it doesn't seem that Jesus that very day went to paradise... unless paradise was understood as the "bosom of Abraham" as part of the realm of the dead who are awaiting resurrection.

³⁰ Hebrews 2:8.

³¹ Matthew 28:18.

³² Ephesians 2:2, 6:12.

we have been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to Jesus' kingdom.³³ We believe that Jesus will return to claim his kingship.³⁴ When his kingdom comes, heaven and earth will be reconciled.³⁵ The dead will awake.³⁶ Creation will be renewed and rejoice together in the liberation from the power of sin, death, and decay.³⁷ God has formed us into a people, from Adam, to Abraham, to David, to Jesus, to the many saints of church history. We are part of a body-politic. A heaven-coming-to-earth kingdom that will displace all political, spiritual, and economic powers.³⁸ We belong to a king who claims every corner of our lives. We are disciples of one who calls us to follow him to the cross,³⁹ to our very death,⁴⁰ forsaking our families,⁴¹ our nations,⁴² our wealth,⁴³ our power,⁴⁴ everything we've ever valued.⁴⁵

The most basic application is simple and terribly frightening. The church as it is today will disappear and we are part of a late generation living in days of decline. God will not forsake his people, but he will strip away our church institutions, as he has done already of our social power. *We have to let go of the temple church and we must utterly reject the theatre church.* The one is already dead.⁴⁶ The other represents a future of people-pleasing while begging for funding. The problem is that we are *falling* into the theatre church, not consciously choosing it. The theatricality of the church today is determined by its social location today. We can only resist becoming theatres or museums by a positive movement toward recovering the primacy of the church.

The problem is that our situation is unprecedented. The rejection of Christianity in the West is relatively new. But what is it a rejection of? Jesus Christ, or the temple church? In my experience it is almost always the latter. Few have encountered the Jesus of Scripture with his radical call of discipleship. It would be understandable if they reject his cost of discipleship. Many rejected Jesus to his face. Most have never heard his call, but only the idea that they have to go to church and behave, otherwise will end up in eternal conscious torment.

We need to become again a primary community, as many of our brothers and sisters in Christ have and continue to do in situations of persecution. We have to make the people of God the primary context in which we live. The church needs to become our *house*, our nation, our family, even if that requires us leaving behind our kinship networks, political affiliations, and more.

³³ Colossians 1:13.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:24.

³⁵ Colossians 1:20.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 15.

³⁷ Isaiah 55.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:24.

³⁹ Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23.

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:10.

⁴¹ Matthew 12:50; 19:29; Mark 3:35, 10:29–30; Luke 14:26.

⁴² Philippians 3:3–11; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11.

⁴³ Matthew 6:19–24, 19:23–24; Mark 10:25; Luke 12:1–34, 16:13, 18:25; James 2:5–6.

⁴⁴ Matthew 23:11; Mark 9:35, 10:43; Philippians 2:3–11.

⁴⁵ Matthew 13:44–46.

⁴⁶ See Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Eerdmans, 1998).

In our hyper-modern world, we are constantly shepherded as sheep by social engineers of various kinds, from social media to urban planners. We are not simply formed by what we worship,⁴⁷ we are formed by the very air we breathe, water we drink, and normal daily behaviors. The church is not able to exist as a primary community in the world as it is, at least not in any way recognizable to either Old or New Testament. We must take seriously the fact that in our current institutional state, Jesus Christ is not our shepherd, since our institutions look almost nothing like his description of the people of God. We must choose this day whom we will serve. And in doing this, we must consciously take responsibility to form alternative primary communities in which the kingdom of God is revealed and the life of discipleship is normal rather than exceptional.

So what must we do? First, we have to stop consuming political media and engaging in the Republican/Democrat conversation as though it were a true narrative. We must not be tempted by alliances and coalitions. We must not talk about recovering something lost in America. If we are in Christ, we are not for America or any other nation. We are a competing *ethnic* group with our own king. We must give up the illusion that we can somehow influence the halls of power. Once upon a time, Presbyterians were capable of this. That time has long passed. The kingdom of God *cannot* be revealed by coalitions with the powerful groups of the world. The kingdom of God can only be revealed among those who take the seriousness of Christ's claim to kingship as seriously as he himself did... all the way to the cross.

We must recover the gospel that Jesus himself preached and not try to offer the goods of this gospel without the cost of discipleship. We must not offer kingdom "principles" or "values" as though we can taste the benefits of Christ's kingship that has not yet been demonstrated. There is no gospel without Jesus. There is no Christian flourishing without taking up one's cross. There is no "common good" for any human city or social group offered by Jesus without their forsaking all other lords to follow Jesus alone. Jesus offered no therapy of spiritual disciplines or rhythms that make our lives in this world slightly more tolerable by giving us a semblance of self-control. This world is dying and we do not yet see our king on the throne. Why are we like Jonah, running from our call to preach the good news that God is king and no other, that we live in Nineveh, and God loves every human and animal in this God-forsaken and rebellious land, and he wants to rescue us from the rulers of this present evil age?

The choice before us is sociologically clear, even if we want to debate the theology: become a primary community or spend the last decades of our existence chasing consumer trends while we run a theatre. As with any strategy, the right time to act is far before we *have* to act. We must be proactive as our captive audience declines, our funding dries up, and our time is devoted to producing ever more perfect content and fundraising.

I am no expert on forming primary communities. I'm not sure there's any 10 best practices to do it either. But were I to venture some kind of strategy it would begin with finding like-minded people who are passionate for recovering the primary-community church, even if we have to move to do so. I would conclude from this theory of social location that architecture matters too. We must move church out of the sanctuary and into the home, not isolated homes

⁴⁷ As James K.A. Smith argues in *Desiring the Kingdom* (Baker Academic, 2009) and *You are What You Love* (Brazos, 2016).

belonging to individuals and families, but into community homes where more of regular life is shared under the lordship of Jesus. We should eat together more than we sit through musical performances together. We should provide services for one another. We should educate and disciple one another in personal ways rather than in large group gatherings. If the gospel is so vital to understand, should we not spend time with individuals to ensure they understand it totally?

Whatever happens, we will need to raise up a new generation of leaders who are not trained in providing either temple services, nor theatrical or musical excellence, but in making disciples and forming primary communities where churches need no name or branding or marketing to be known, but will be known by the particular relationships of love a church community has for its own people, for its neighbors, and its enemies.⁴⁸

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters (in Christ) *dwell together* in unity!⁴⁹

⁴⁸ John 13:35.

⁴⁹ Psalm 133:1.

Part III: Applications

Why Church?

Rev. Dr. Eric O. Jacobsen

Our new members' classes¹ are organized around 3 basic questions:

- why Jesus?
- why church? and
- why this church?

In my experience, it is the second of these questions that presents the greatest challenge to many in the class. It is very common in our culture for people to distrust institutions. And by extension, as an entity that clearly fits this descriptor, it's easy to mistrust the church. A lot of folks who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior find participation in a local church to be optional or even unnecessary. They may have had a church they really liked at some point in their faith journey and they may sporadically participate in some local churches, but they don't see the church as a necessary aspect of their discipleship journey. And they certainly don't see the necessity of formally aligning themselves with a particular church.

It's not uncommon for folks see the church as an inhibitor to vital faith. Kavin Rowe, captures this sentiment well in his recent book, *Christianity's Surprise*:

*Today, we almost automatically think of institutions as bureaucratic extinguishers of vibrant faith and all that goes into them – dynamic, relationships, powerful worship, works of justice, and imaginative thinking. If you want to slow or stop, the beating heart of new faith, institutionalize it. If you want to oppress human beings, build institutions that smother their natural creativity. If you want to ensure that innovation never gets the upper hand, do things in an institution. If you want drudgery day after day, work in an institution.*²

The point that this kind of institutional cynicism misses is that institutions are necessary for human sustainability and flourishing. Institutions can help regulate the power differentials that exist in any group and prevent both mob rule and bullying. Institutions coordinate our activities so that we can accomplish more together than we could alone. And institutions allow wisdom and best practices to be passed on from generation to generation.

Such knee jerk rejection of the institutional church needs to be challenged because it betrays an ignorance of history as well as a deep misunderstanding of the value of institutions to human flourishing. It also ignores key truths about the church found in Scripture. In the Bible, we find Jesus calling the church into existence and serving as the head of the church.³ The church is referred to as the body of Christ.⁴ And the church is depicted as His beloved bride.⁵ We also find

¹ Yes, we call them 'New Members' classes rather than 'Covenant Partner classes. We love the word covenant and believe that it accurately communicates a proper understanding of our life together. However, without an opportunity to explain that term, it can come off as stuffy or obscure. So we invite visitors to a New Members' class and when they show up we explain why it's actually a Covenant Community class.

² Rowe, Kavin. *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Abingdon: Nashville, 2020), 55.

³ Matthew 16:18.

⁴ Ephesians 2:22–23.

⁵ Revelation 19:7–9.

that the sanctifying work of Christ in our lives is intended to take place within the context of the church.⁶

Disciples of Christ should not reject or dismiss the church, because the Lord we claim to follow holds the church in high regard. This should be reason enough for us to value the church, but there are also numerous benefits to participating in the local church and even becoming a covenant partner. These benefits are articulated in the ECO Essential Tenants:

Becoming a covenant partner is important not only to the congregation but even more importantly for the covenant partner, as they are positioned to receive encouragement, support, and correction that the Lord promises to those who share spiritual fellowship. In committing to the cause of a life lived in and through Jesus Christ, covenant partners grow in Christian community together to become more Christ-like. In Christian community, we realize the fullness of life together and life in Christ, and discover our unique place in a common mission and narrative of God's work. The covenant partner and the congregation are both blessed and become a great blessing as they covenant together, intentionally, in Christ's work. (1.0304)

One of the major benefits of being part of a covenant community is discipleship. We hear and engage with God's word in gathered worship and we are encouraged to develop and maintain various spiritual practices that are vital to faith. We experience formal and informal accountability within the context of the covenant community.

One of my favorite ways that the church fosters discipleship within the covenant community, however, is the disguised blessing of irritation. It's easy to be charitable and patient with people in the abstract. It's much harder to cultivate these fruits of the Spirit when you have to plan the annual stewardship campaign with Jessica who follows fringe political threads on social media and loves to tell you about them.

But as we learn to worship and work alongside of those we wouldn't naturally get along with, we open ourselves up to being formed more and more into Christ's image by the power of the Holy Spirit. But this only tends to happen as we make a commitment to a specific local church. When we pop in and out of various churches, we avoid the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to shape us as we strive to love and partner with annoying people. And the fact that doing so enables the self-delusion that we are never the annoying person, provides a particularly effective inhibitor of spiritual formation.

This leads in to the second major benefit of being part of a covenant community—community. The church provides a place for us to belong. A major aspect of community has to do with horizontal relationships—the church provides an environment for cultivating and sustaining a rich variety of human relationships. One of the fundamental truths we discover right away in the scriptures is that we were created for community. The very first negative pronouncement in the Bible is that it is not good for man to be alone.⁷ This does not mean that everybody needs to be married to be fulfilled, but it does mean that every disciple is meant to be in Christian community. The local church provides the appropriate setting for this essential aspect of our humanity.

⁶ Ephesians 5:26–27.

⁷ Genesis 2:18.

But community is not only about our horizontal relationships. It has to do with our vertical relationships. We encounter God individually, but God almost always calls us engage with him in the company of other people. God relates to us in the context of community. God called Abraham individually, but He called him to be the father of a great nation. Jesus called his first followers individually or in pairs, but formed 12 of them into a very eclectic community.

The particular kind of community into which we are called is described by our ECO polity as a *covenant* community. And that is an important qualifier. A covenant is an agreement that prioritizes relationship. It is very different than a contractual or transactional agreement. A contractual agreement is contingent on some kind of exchange and an assumption of mutual benefit. I have a contractual relationship with the guy who cuts my lawn. Every other week, I get a nice looking lawn and he gets some money. But if at any time, the benefit of my nice looking lawn becomes less valuable than the cost or if the money he is paid feels less valuable than the cost of cutting my lawn, our relationship will be terminated.

Our culture is a lot more comfortable with contractual relationships than covenantal ones. And relationships that used to be covenantal have been shifting in the direction towards contractual. Marriage used to be understood as covenantal—couples committed to one another for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, “till death do us part”. Now it is considered acceptable to switch a spouse out for a newer model or for a better fit. And it’s considered a violation of self-actualization to remain with someone who no longer makes you happy.

Fortunately, we still tend to assume covenantal relationships with our children. We don’t generally fire our kids or kick them out for underperforming their chores. But this is one of the last places in which our culture (at least in the West) recognizes the validity of covenant relationships. All this is to say, that calling ourselves a covenant community in ECO churches is meant to be a countercultural statement. We are committed to one another even when we disagree with one another and even when the cost of being together sometimes feels greater than the benefit.

And lastly, being part of a covenant community is integral to participating in the mission of God. As the missional theologians put it, the church doesn’t have a mission, the mission has a church. The church is God’s chosen instrument for carrying out His work in the world.

If I’m being perfectly honest, this doesn’t always make sense to me. I’ve questioned God’s wisdom on this strategy on more than one occasion. Most of the churches with which I’ve been involved have not been the most efficient or effective organizations. However, in each of the churches I have been a part of, despite all of our flaws and shortcomings, God has been able to accomplish amazing things through us.

Can one be a disciple of Jesus Christ without being part of a church? Can one participate in the mission of God as an autonomous individual? Yes and yes. However, this is not God’s plan A for the Christian life. God’s intent is for us to walk the pathway of discipleship and mission alongside of others in committed relationship. When we are called to Christ, we are called to community. To say yes to the former while rejecting the latter is to follow a path hewn more out of American individualism than the will of God. ECO’s understanding of the church as covenant community and disciples as covenant partners is a particularly relevant counter cultural response to this alarming trend within our society.

A Reflection on Virtual Church

Shadi Fatehi

The current pandemic's enveloping of the world has made gathering for worship in many of our contexts hazardous. Consequently, many churches have closed their buildings and utilized a new 'virtual space' for their gatherings. According to some, such virtual or online services are likely to be maintained even after the health risks have mitigated, if not replacing the in-person option, then standing alongside it as a worthy choice for church members to consider long-term.

This restrictive situation brought upon the world by Covid, while new for many, is not entirely new for the Iranian church. Given the security restrictions of the Iranian church context, many Iranian Christians have spent years gathering in a place that is different to a church building, be it in a house church in someone's home or on a virtual space.

What follows is a brief exploration into whether and to what extent a virtual space can be considered as a fitting place of worship for a local church. Two important theological lenses will be used in approaching the issue at hand; the first is a *Theology of Place* and, the second, a *Theology of the Body*. Let us begin with the former.

Theology of Place

'It is impossible,' Wendell Berry notes, 'to divorce the question of what we do from the question of where we are – or rather, where we think we are.'¹ In a deep way our actions in the world are entangled with our sense of place. While difficult to define, 'place', according to Edward Casey is 'a thick and complex concept, a fundamental component of our creatureliness... such that to exist is to be emplaced.'² Though place and space are inseparable, place is distinguished from space. Space, in our modern world, is a theoretical concept and an abstraction from the lived experience of place. Philosophers of place tell us that our late modern globalized world is experiencing a "crisis of place", 'for since the Middle Ages through till now, philosophy has seen place as more or less eradicated by abstract space'.³ Today, place has been reduced to something that one merely moves *through* with great speed. According to anthropologist Marc Auge, modern man spends an increasing amount of time in 'non-places,' which he defines as spaces of anonymity and transience like hotel rooms, airports and motorways.⁴

However, place has a significant role throughout the Bible, from Eden in Genesis right down to the New Jerusalem in Revelation. Place is important because it is a created good, and though fallen now, it will one day be fully renewed by God. Place is important because of the incarnation – Christ embedded himself in a physical place. And place is important because one day God will indwell a physical place where heaven and earth meet. In the Old Testament, we see that

¹ Berry, Wendell, *The Unsettling of America* (Sierra Club, 1977), 51.

² Casey Edward S., *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (University of California, 1998), ix.

³ Bartholomew Craig, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Baker Academic, 2011).

⁴ Auge Marc, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (Verso, 1995).

it is the physical building of the Temple that is regarded as the sacred place wherein the presence of the Lord is made available. This presence was encountered only by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies.

When we turn to the New Testament, however, we see a seismic shift whereby the person of Jesus *fulfils* the place of the temple, such that where two or three gather every place can be a sacred place where He is present. Some take this to mean that in the New Testament physical place loses all the significance it had in the Old Testament, such that it now no longer really matters and is spiritualised or personified in Jesus. However, if we carefully follow the logic of the Bible narrative, we will see that the expanding or extension of God's presence to every place in no way reduces the importance of place in Scripture and we must take care not to make that subtle yet problematic jump. What changed for the early followers of Christ was not the significance of place for their spirituality; place was still important for them. Rather, what changed was the belief that God's presence was limited to only one specific place.

As a growing church with no official buildings, it can be tempting for Iranian Christians to slip into thinking that place is somehow irrelevant or unimportant for our worship. We might say things like "the church is made up of living stones so physical stones do not matter anymore!" However, a Theology of Place, as briefly outline above, challenges us, instead, to be ever more aware of the importance of place and place-making, and to consider how different environments and spaces in which we gather impact our worship.

By looking through the lens of a Theology of Place we can assess whether our places of worship are suitable or unsuitable for their purpose. For example, meeting in a home can amplify the sense of intimacy and hospitality in the church as members gather in a small and modest living room for worship. Meeting in a home usually means sharing a meal around the table, this again increases the sense of intimacy but also serves as a tangible reminder for Iranian believers of Christ's meal with his disciples and the heavenly banquet that awaits us when he returns. Meeting in the physical atmosphere of a home can likewise teach us that God speaks to us in the ordinary, that his power is at work in the mundane and the everyday, and that he is Lord over all aspects of life. Moreover, the home as a place of worship can deepen the sense that the church is the true household of God, a family of brothers and sisters in Christ. On the other hand, as a place of worship, the enclosed and private nature of a home means that the visible and public dimensions of a local church may be lost. Given the security restrictions in Iran, this is not of concern for us right now. But in usual circumstances, the lack of public access to a church should raise some concern. As we have seen in this exercise, a Theology of Place enables us to appreciate how meeting for worship in a home, simply because of the kind of place it is, can impact the church in positive and negative ways.

What then can a Theology of Place teach us about the suitability of virtual space for worship? As David Lyon and many others have argued concerning virtual space, 'there is no place to this space.'⁵ In other words, virtual space is not an actual place, it is empty of place. Virtual space falls into the category of Marc Auge's *non-places*: abstract, non-physical, anonymous, and transient. That there is no place to virtual space should be a warning for us. As mentioned above, place is an important aspect of what it means to be human, and it plays an important role in the story of God

⁵ Lyon, David, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Polity), 2000.

as revealed in Scripture. Therefore, virtual space can to some extent reduce an important aspect of our humanity: that of being emplaced.

Theology of the Body

Let us now turn to the Theology of the Body. Many readers will know that the body, while treated by Gnosticism as corrupt and abominable, is viewed by Christianity as created good and now being renewed by the God of the incarnation who dwelled among us in body and now reigns embodied. Readers will also agree then that the church – the *body of Christ* – is invited to follow the pattern of the incarnation, and therefore, take seriously the role of the body.

The body has always played a key role in worship; we see this in the Bible and throughout the history of the church. Worship has always been understood as something in which our entire being – our whole selves – is involved. Singing, bowing, touching, tasting, standing, laying of hands, all are bodily actions. It is unsurprising that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew words used most for worship literally translate to bodily motions of bowing or falling down or prostrating oneself. In the New Testament, also, the word translated into worship is *proskuneo*, meaning to kiss the hand or to bow down and touch one's forehead to the ground.⁶

Alongside their role in worship, bodies also play an important role in deepening fellowship and community, one of the important reasons why we gather. As theologian Paul Griffiths notes, 'genuine communication occurs in our presence to one another in the body. Such presence constitutes a personal availability to the other as both an object and a subject, where we make ourselves vulnerable to the other's *touch*.'⁷

In addition to worship and community, bodies are being revived as a key part of our missional formation. The work of James K. A. Smith in the last few years is most notable in this regard. Drawing on French phenomenologists, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, Smith argues that it is through repeated embodied practices that facilitate the work of the Spirit – *liturgicus habitus* – that our imaginations are shaped and our desires as God's missional agents in the world are transformed.⁸

A Theology of the Body is thus an important lens through which we can again assess the suitability of a virtual space for our church gatherings. It does this by asking how and in what ways the places we choose to gather encourage or deter an embodied participation in worship, community and missional formation. As it pertains to virtual space, we can say that it 'asks too little of our bodies.' As Micah Latimer-Dennis observes, 'though engaging the senses in worship varies depending on each of our traditions, the screen undoubtedly flattens all such embodied engagement. Touch, taste, and smell are absent, and it is awkward for the congregant to stand or to kneel in front of the screen. In a virtual space our bodies are ignored, left static and passive.'⁹ Virtual space also divides the worshipping body, 'into those on and those in front of a screen,

⁶ Kim, Jay Y., *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places and Things in the Digital Age* (Intervarsity: 2020).

⁷ Griffiths, Paul, *Christian Flesh*. (Stanford University, 2019). pp 176.

⁸ Smith, James K. A., *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, (Baker Academic, 2013).

⁹ Latimer-Dennis, Micah, "Ten Theses on Digitally Mediated Worship," August 2020, <https://breakingground.us/ten-theses-on-digitally-mediated-worship/>.

between the watchers and the watched.¹⁰ Therefore, virtual spaces can seem to weaken and thin our sense of fellowship, exactly because of the lack of embodied presence.

Conclusion

Both a Theology of Place and a Theology of the Body have revealed to us some of the subtle yet significant shortcomings of virtual space as a place of worship. The former confronted us with the *placelessness* of virtual space and the latter to its diminishment of the role of the body. To conclude, we can say that one of the primary weaknesses of virtual space as a place of worship is that it does not treat us as whole persons. In ignoring our bodies and the reality of our emplacement, virtual space does not take seriously the entirety of who we are as human beings but rather seems to reduce us to something less than fully human. Therefore, we should take care before too quickly embracing virtual space as a permanent choice for church gatherings.

¹⁰ Latimer-Dennis, "Ten Theses."

Churches, Buildings, and Neighborhoods

Rev. Dr. Eric O. Jacobsen

"Should we have our meeting at Anthem or at the church?" This seemingly simple question, I face regularly as a pastor, just happens to be fraught with theological meaning. Or at least it raises some important theological questions. To be more specific, it raises the question as to whether the building where my office is located can accurately be described as a *church* on a Tuesday afternoon?

When we encounter the English word church in the New Testament it is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which literally means to call out or to gather. It refers to a local congregation not the building. In the first century, disciples of Jesus were called to follow Him in the context of community. They partnered with others to carry on the work of Jesus in their communities, and they gathered together for fellowship and worship.

At this time, many disciples of Christ continued to worship in their local synagogue. However, local congregations were also starting to meet in whatever structures were available, which most often meant private homes. At this time, the church referred to a people of God in a particular community who together were participating in the *missio dei*.

Over time, private homes would sometimes be adapted to suit the needs of those who gathered for worship. But, it wasn't until the 4th century that buildings began to be constructed for the purpose of serving a local congregation. Following the legalization of the Christian faith, Christian communities could begin to erect buildings to be used explicitly for the purpose of public worship.

In light of the fact that the early church did not initially have dedicated buildings, the question must be asked whether the term church should refer to the building or the people. A good case can be made for restricting the term church to the people included within a particular Christian community. Peter's description of the people of God as, "living stones ... being built into a spiritual house"¹ lends support to this notion.

When we think of the church as the people rather than the building, it becomes more difficult to attach the church to a specific place. Unlike buildings, people tend to change location frequently. This, then, necessitates making a distinction between the church gathered and the church scattered. When the church is gathered, it expresses faithfulness to God through public worship, fellowship, and other collective activities. When the church is scattered, it expresses its faithfulness to God through acts of evangelism and compassion in the community as well as through the various vocations to which its members are called.

Because gathering for worship is an important aspect of what it means to be a covenant community, the particular place where the congregation gathers is not insignificant. A building built and utilized specifically for Christian worship can help reinforce and support patterns of regular worship for a congregation. And a building utilized regularly for worship can provide an emblematic expression of worship for the neighborhood. Therefore, I don't disparage the

¹ 1 Peter 2:5.

practice of referring to the building as a church, so long as we don't lose sight of dynamic nature of the church in both its gathered and scattered states.

Although I don't believe there is anything wrong with describing a permanent building dedicated to worship as a church, it is important to keep in mind that a permanent dedicated building is not essential for the church to exist. In addition to these type of structures, congregations can meet in rented buildings, in homes, and (in certain climates) outdoors. Each of these types of gathering spaces have advantages and disadvantages for a local congregation.

But church as building or congregation doesn't fully capture the full scope of what we might include in our understanding of church. We also need to consider the geographic designation of parish. Another outcome of the legalization and spread of Christianity following the 4th century was the development of parishes. A parish was initially conceived as a geographical region under the authority of a priest who was responsible for every soul within that region. The parish system began soon after the legalization of Christianity, but was formalized at the Council of Trent in the 16th century. And as the Church of England became independent from Rome, the parish system was one of the things they retained. A number of Christian denominations continue to utilize the term parish even as its practical application wanes.

However, the concept of parish can widen the scope of our imagination when thinking about church buildings. A parish would normally include a dedicated church building (parish church). But the priest who was granted authority over the parish would understand his scope of responsibility to include those who lived in the parish boundaries regardless of whether they ever attended services at the parish church. Likewise, folks who lived within the parish boundaries, would likely feel a sense of connection to their parish church regardless of their habits of worship.

With the fragmentation of Christian denominations and ubiquitous pluralism, the management of an actual parish has gotten a bit impractical despite the persistence of the term. However, the notion of parish contributes some helpful fodder for the imagination as we consider the local church.

In the first place, it can be an effective mission strategy for leaders of local church to focus a significant amount of attention on the neighborhood that surrounds the church. Many church leaders only consider what goes on within the property lines of the church and within the homes of members. So long as they have good signage and sufficient parking, they don't seem to care about problems in the neighborhood (including ones caused by the church). This insular perspective represents a missed opportunity and can be very off putting for those who live, work, and recreate near a church.

In a similar vein, church leaders do well to consider the ways in which their church building and property can play a role in to the neighborhood as well as how the church building communicates to the neighborhood. A beautiful building and well-kept grounds signals to the neighborhood that the church cares about the common good. An ugly building and messy grounds sends the message that church leadership only care about those inside the building.

Signs that are scaled and oriented only to automobiles signal a palpable disregard for the church's more immediate neighbors. Pedestrian oriented signage and gracious public amenities (such as benches) let the neighbors know that the church cares about them. Church

leaders that allow the wider community utilize their building for community forums and other public services bless the neighborhood and cultivate good will.

So, should we have our meeting at Anthem or at church? It's actually a trick question. Both of these settings could be considered a church. Because of the patterns of worship for my local congregation as well as the emblematic worship of the building itself, I believe building where my office is located can be accurately described as a church. On the other hand the notion of scattered church as well as the concept of parish allow us to describe a local coffee shop as church as well. The more important question is whether our meeting contributes to the *missio dei*. If it can, it we are meeting at church regardless of our location.

Success and the Church

Rev. Jos Smolik

I wonder if the bookshelves in your home or office might look like mine. Along with the standard dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, etc. I also have a whole line of books about church growth and dynamics. These books have familiar titles; they are designed to help church leaders think about vision, organization, strategies for expansion, effective leadership and managing church budgets, facilities and people. Often these books are written by successful pastors at successful churches who sincerely want other churches to be successful like them. I've read a lot of these books—have you?

But a few shelves over and down, I have a row of texts about spiritual growth, nurture and challenge. These books have authors with familiar names as well. This group urges us to slow down, to be defined by a deep spirituality, to be of sound doctrine, to let go of the ever-present need to achieve and to instead embrace a slow, faithful process of shepherding and ministry. They rightly compel us to evaluate the role of the soul in our leadership, they remind us to invest ourselves first in prayer and contemplation before we pursue impressive church metrics. I've read a lot of these books as well—have you?

It's not uncommon for me to spin around at my desk and look at the titles on the shelves and think on the seeming contradiction displayed there. The vision prompts all kinds of questions in me: what am I really trying to do as a pastor? What does it look like for a church to thrive and flourish? Will my job depend on the metrics I produce? Will my ministry suffer if I don't attend to my soul as my primary vocation? What if faithfulness and achievement are completely unrelated? Where is God at work in my church and will I be able to recognize Him moving if I'm too busy planning programming? I often feel the tension between church growth and spiritual depth—do you?

On the one hand, I want our church to grow and to prosper, I want to see more individuals in the pews on more Sunday mornings. I want more people served, more giving to those in need, I want to have a larger impact on our community. I also can feel the pressure that comes with looking at the week's attendance numbers and the offering totals and the monthly session report on finances. It is rare that these numbers don't cause some measure of concern for the health and future of the church; and I want it to be different, to be better.

But there is another competing desire: the desire to be faithful to God; to persevere in preaching, teaching and praying for our congregation. I want to be the kind of pastor who is defined by prayer, who demonstrably cares for others, who sits quietly with a person in need, who gently urges our congregation to a depth of intimacy with Christ and sacrificial giving regardless of whether that fills the pews or is easily marketable to our community. And because I want this, too, I can feel concerned about how little time I spend in prayer or sitting quietly before God or reading Scripture for a purpose other than to preach or teach; and I want it to be different, to be better.

For me, this tension coalesces around a simple question: what does it mean for my church to be successful and how do I best help us get there? (This is like the question ECO asks regularly: What's your church's flourishing next step?") Realizing this is a very contextual question, and

every church will answer that question differently, I find that frequently there are two competing themes to potential answers. One has to do with visioning, strategizing and organizational leadership that calls us to increased reach and metrics. The other has to do with slowing down, focusing in on depth, faithfulness, right-teaching and authenticity. These two are certainly NOT mutually exclusive, but they do represent different areas of emphasis in pursuit of ministry fruitfulness. Eugene Peterson draws out many of these tensions in his book *The Contemplative Pastor* as he speaks of the push and pull those in church leadership feel between “running the church” and the “cure of souls.” As church leaders know, the greatest resource we have is our time and attention. And so, these distinct efforts at ministry fruitfulness represent also a distinct call to how we will spend our time and our efforts. Will we more often reach for the books on the church growth shelf or on the spiritual formation shelf?

There are many thinkers, pastors and theologians who have wrestled through this dichotomy. Another of Peterson’s books, *Working the Angles* explores the relationship between “the visible lines of pastoral work” (preaching, teaching and administration), as well as the “small angles of ministry” (prayer, Scripture and spiritual direction). Charles Spurgeon lamented that there were ministers who were earnest in pursuing prayer and Scripture but who produced no results. The PC(USA)’s Six Great Ends of the Church, encompass calls for both spiritual depth and kingdom growth. In their book *The Trellis and the Vine* authors Colin Marshall and Tony Payne seek to direct us to a balance between building the structure and metrics of a church (trellis work) and nurturing the spiritual growth of the church (vine work). And there are many, many more.

If church practitioners and faithful leaders keep working through this question of church “success”, what about us? We won’t solve this seeming contradiction posed by our bookshelves now, but perhaps we can ask ourselves three questions that might help us move closer to an answer.

What are the connections (or disconnections) between church success, leadership faithfulness and ministry fruitfulness; and how do they relate to one another? How are these three pursued in our individual church contexts? As you and your church think through this question, you might discover that you are predisposed to favor one over the other. For example, a church may find that it desires ministry fruitfulness yet continues to measure itself by church growth metrics that don’t capture its true aims. Or a pastor may find that while rightly pursuing deepening spiritual growth she has missed potential opportunities to strengthen her church’s impact and reach in its community.

Where and to what extent is a worldly vision for organizational or numeric success in competition with a biblical vision for perseverant, humble faithfulness? It is possible for us to embrace one and neglect the other? It is important for churches and leaders to spend time contemplating how these two concepts might interact with one another. As a church works through this question it might find a healthy way to navigate competing demands on a leader’s time and attention. Or perhaps a church may discern that it has allowed “success” to be defined by measures that have little to do with the primary call on a to be a covenant community where

"God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments and the faithful practice of mutual discipline."¹

How can we properly evaluate ministry effectiveness in a way that honors the biblical call for both humble, suffering perseverance and Great Commission fruit-bearing? This is the question of metrics. Every church—and every church leader—needs to grapple with how to evaluate ministry. Christ's pictures of a mustard seed and yeast remind us that sometimes the growth we desire to produce can't be measured or even perceived. Can faithfulness even be quantified? If not, how should we hold our churches and ourselves accountable for spiritual attentiveness and effective efforts at disciple-making?

¹ *Essential Tenets*, Part III, Section C.

Accountability and the Church

Rev. Jos Smolik

We've all had the experience of going to the doctor for a check-up. The doctor notes our vital signs, asks us probing questions and takes a much closer look at us than we're usually comfortable with in order to *encourage* and *challenge* us toward better health. And most of us don't like it. We know that often as a result of a visit with the doctor she is going to recommend significant changes or she is going to challenge some of our current behaviors. She may even issue a warning or reveal an area of concern that will require us to seek additional attention and care. And although many of us may not like the check-up process, we submit to it because we know it is important and it will help us stay healthy. Something similar is implied by notions of accountability within and between churches.

We need others to check on us. We need them to ask good questions, identify areas of thriving and growth, point out areas of weakness or concern. We need others to warn us of unrecognized dangers and support us in striving for the best. This is true of our physical *and* our spiritual health; and we need to be willing to offer this kind of care in return.

As we discuss what it means for the church to be a covenant community—and what it means for a denomination to be a community of communities—it is important to explore the notion of health within and among our churches; and healthy spiritual communities require healthy accountability. In fact, we require—at an individual level and a community level—a heart for, a commitment to and systems of accountability.

For our purposes, let's define accountability as the *encouragement* and *challenge* we offer (and receive) in order to help each other maintain right belief (orthodoxy) and pursue right behavior (orthopraxy). Because accountability encompasses ideas of support and admonition, and addresses thought as well as action, this definition will be usefully broad enough to help us explore the foundations of accountability as well as point out obstacles to it.

Foundations of Accountability

First, it's important to note the substantial biblical and theological foundations for healthy mutual accountability. Scripture itself provides not only many examples of healthy accountability but is also the prime tool for the exhortation and admonition that should characterize the church. As we know, all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."¹ These tasks are summed up by the word "accountability" as defined above. It can be argued, therefore, that all of Scripture is a tool to accomplish the edification and correction of God's people—that God's Word itself is aimed at the accountability that comes within thriving intra- and inter- church relationships.

Though we could go into depth and look at Old Testament structures for building and maintaining a community of holiness and orthodoxy, let's focus briefly on how accountability manifests itself in the New Testament. With our wide definition, it is possible to contend that

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16.

most, if not all, of the epistles were written with explicit purposes of accountability. Paul challenges false doctrine in Galatians rebuking Peter the apostle in the process, he encourages restoration and right action among his friends in the letter to Philippi, he pleads with Timothy to hold to the true teaching that has been entrusted to him. In the first epistle that bears his name, Peter writes to the scattered exiles, admonishing them to holiness and offering encouragement in suffering. John warns of false teachers and calls attention to the malicious behavior of Diotrephes. Now, add to these examples the explicit statements like those that remind Jesus followers to “spur one another on to love and good deeds”² “encourage one another and build each other up”³ or restore the person caught in sin gently”⁴ and we just scratch the surface of the biblical foundation of accountability for right belief and right action aimed at individuals and churches.

ECO’s *Essential Tenets, Confessional Standards, Polity* and vision frame also give tremendous support to the call for healthy accountability practices. Part C of Section III of the *Essential Tenets* states: “the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another’s burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.” Question 85 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* reminds us that “Christ commanded that those who bear the Christian name in an unchristian way either in doctrine or in life should be given brotherly admonition.” It is a key part of our tradition and belief that accountability be practiced among believers and churches.

In fact, we should note some key distinctive features of ECO that highlight this call for accountability. Chief among these is the requirement for all pastors to participate in a pastoral covenant group, the purpose of which is “to coach, encourage and pray for one another.”⁵ These groups are defined by the practices of mutual accountability – exploring each other’s health, ministry health and addressing challenges and obstacles. ECO also has an explicit structure for churches to hold each other accountable with the expectation that all congregations participate in a Mission Affinity Group (MAG). MAGs are specifically designed to help implement inter-church accountability with the stated purpose to “increase accountability and encouragement and spur one another on to love and good deeds.”⁶

Obstacles to Accountability

The biblical and theological support for a committed practice of accountability is strong, and our Reformed tradition and ECO have robust systems in place for healthy accountability; but there are common obstacles to giving and receiving the kind of encouragement and challenge that individuals and congregations need. We’ll explore three of them briefly and discuss how there are parallel obstacles in both *offering* admonition and warning and *receiving* exhortation and challenge.

² Hebrews 10:24.

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

⁴ Galatians 6:1.

⁵ *ECO Polity* 2.0402.

⁶ *ECO Polity* 1.0104.

The initial obstacle is that of familiarity and transparency. Many of us cannot hold others accountable for belief and behavior because we simply don't **know** each other well enough to do so. And many of us may not receive admonition or encouragement because we don't allow ourselves to **be known**. Being sufficiently familiar with an individual or a community to invest in his/her/its well-being—to be the doctor offering the check-up—means we must be invested in building significant connection and friendship. It is in relationship that our encouragement and warning might be grounded in a real sense of the other's health. The necessary nature of familiarity is obvious on an individual level; but it is also critical that churches seeking to offer exhortation and correction to other communities know each other well. Hopefully our Presbyterian polity goes a long way to encourage familiarity. Churches are meaningfully connected to **other** churches in presbyteries within which we can experience care on a community level. However, we still must make the time to get to know other churches and those churches' defining characteristics, their pressing challenges and their visions for the future. Only with familiarity, after taking the pulse and reading the chart, can we begin to offer wise feedback, correction and exhortation.

The flip side of familiarity is vulnerability; in order to receive the accountability we need we must allow ourselves to be known. Many of us in church leadership know the temptation to paint a more rosy picture of our own spiritual health (and our church's health) than may actually be the case. But we must be willing to share with others the reality of what is happening in our hearts and in our congregations. We must allow the caregiver to take our temperature and we must embrace honesty that allows others to minister to our needs. Even if that means potential challenge along with proper encouragement. To withhold an accurate image of "how we're doing" is as foolish as going to the doctor and not speaking of what ails you.

The next obstacle to healthy accountability is that of courage and humility. To give or receive actions of accountability undoubtedly requires both of these traits. When we seek to build up a fellow believer or community of faith, it will often require courage to speak honestly; we must resolve to communicate truthfully with one another about perceived weaknesses. To enter into hard or difficult conversations demands a humble audacity in order to address the potential dangers we see in others or in other communities of belief. Courage is needed, because we risk awkward conversations, hurt feelings or damaged relationships when we approach anyone with a godly rebuke or correction.

This risk that requires courage also demands the essential requirement of humility. This may be far harder for many, for both courage and humility are necessary for **receiving** healthy admonition as well. We must be willing to accept the honest assessment of ourselves, our churches and our actions. A self-protectiveness born of pride and fueled by insecurity may be one of the biggest obstacles to true accountability among churches and their leaders today. But courage and humility, grounded in the confident knowledge of Christ's saving love and sure redemption means we can accept—and potentially even welcome—words of challenge or correction because they are necessary for us and for our churches to grow.

The final obstacle to healthy accountability is gentleness and vulnerability. Repeatedly, Scripture urges mature believers toward a defining quality of gentleness in the way they interact with others. This is a more nuanced concept than the simple word "gentleness" may imply. The godly call is to an attitude that is shaped by seeking the best interests of the other—we are to

put the needs of others before our own. Gentleness implies the renunciation of our own desires and self-interest and instead with a forbearance, geniality, magnanimity and generosity of spirit we seek what is best for someone else. This attitude is especially critical for times we seek to exhort or challenge another. With accountability motives matter, and so does our attitude; admonition offered with an air of haughtiness or pride does little to affect the change we might want for another. Instead, we must adopt with others a gentleness that is “evident to all.”⁷

Again, the parallel quality to gentleness is vulnerability. When receiving encouragement or challenge from one who has our best interests in mind, we can submit to their correction and exhortation. If we adopt a vulnerable position that trusts in the selflessness of a fellow brother or sister in Christ, we can experience true encouragement, restoration and growth. By being vulnerable we allow for learning and correction that come from the Spirit of Christ that is active in the words of care offered from another.

⁷ Philippians 4:5.

Deconstruction

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

Deconstruction is something of a buzzword these days. But what it boasts in trendiness it lacks in precision, and it pitches a confusingly large tent. Deconstruction variously refers to the process of revisiting aspects of one's faith tradition (especially evangelicalism) even while still clinging to Christ's lordship, to the culminating decision to reject Christ and his bride all together. A deconstructionist may be rethinking Christ and his nature, questioning the church and its value, or reconsidering the centrality of other aspects of belief once held dear and now viewed as peripheral—or downright harmful. A deconstructionist who is considering rejecting Christ altogether may not be rejecting Jesus as much as a false image of him (such as a "John Wayne" Jesus, to use author Kristin Kobes Du Mez' recent diagnosis).¹ And sometimes, one who is deconstructing is much like Christ himself: bearing scars inflicted at the hands of God's own people.

Deconstruction may seem like a recent trend. And as much as its unique contemporary manifestation should be grappled with, it also has longstanding historical, philosophical, and biblical precedents.²

The Reformation was by some accounts itself a deconstruction. Luther's 95 theses, infamously nailed to the door of Germany's Wittenberg cathedral, protested that the church of the time had been untrue to Christ's gospel and instead courted corruption and abuse. His critiques culminated in a mass exodus from the Catholic church, and the surplus of Protestant denominations today is a product of his ongoing legacy.

Similarly, the works of a well-known Christian philosopher is also of a deconstructionist profile. And it may not be coincidental that he wrote in Luther's wake. Søren Kierkegaard, widely regarded as the founder of existentialism, criticized his local Danish Protestant church in the early 19th century for conflating the gospel with bourgeois culture and a fixed, sentimental script regarding work, marriage, and family. For the life-long bachelor, the only recourse for the disciple is to risk a daring "leap of faith", throwing every last morsel of reliance on God and not on one's own ability to rationalize him, let alone on established ideas of social and cultural protocol. Kierkegaard reminds us that sometimes, certain habits and institutional forms slapped with the label 'Christianity' are really a parasitized shell inhabited by cultural mores that have long since been ruled by Christ and his gospel.³ Kierkegaard's deconstruction is one that rejects nominal Christianity and seeks to reclaim the risky faith that follows after the crucified Christ.

¹ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, First edition (Liveright, 2020).

² Preston Sprinkle, "Jesus, the Bible, and Finding Christ through Deconstruction: Brian Zahnd," *Theology in the Raw*, n.d., <https://www.prestonsprinkle.com/theology-in-the-raw/898-brian-zahnd>.

³ The 21st century American version of this phenomenon has been diagnosed by two sociologists as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 1. issued as an Oxford University Press paperback (Oxford University, 2009).

But we should also recognize that the roots of deconstruction reach beneath both recent history and philosophy to tap Scripture itself. Israel underwent deconstruction quite literally. In 587 BC, they faced the smoking ruins of their temple, the house where God has promised to dwell with them in the land he had given them. And then they turned their backs to head east to Babylon for several generations in exile. Stripped of their land, their temple, and their sacrificial system—previously central elements to their faith and life with God—they nevertheless developed the conviction that God had not entirely abandoned them, but had gone with them into exile. There, they learned how to cling to God’s covenant and their identity as his people through practices like prayer, fasting, and Sabbath-keeping. Some scholars even believe that it was in Babylon, gathering in homes to worship together, that forerunners of synagogues were established.

In those post-exilic synagogues, Jesus preached his revolutionary message of God’s coming kingdom, which would soon overturn the corrupt order of the world. He also performed healings that disrupted religious and legal protocol. It is not a far stretch to imagine 1st century AD Pharisees—whose legalistic toes were constantly stepped on by Jesus’ iconoclastic habits—labeling him a deconstructionist. And one of the primary charges with which he was convicted for crucifixion was quite literally a charge of deconstruction: Jesus’ claim to destroy and rebuild the temple (Mark 14:58).

The sweep of the biblical narrative suggests that deconstruction need not be perceived as an existential threat to faith. Instead, our scripture indicates that elements of deconstruction are a healthy and even necessary aspect of the journey of God’s people and of those who would follow the Way of Christ. Indeed, entire books of the bible—Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes—are witnesses to the requisite role of robust questioning to the life of faith.

But not all cases of deconstruction are equal, and conversations around it should be navigated with openness and compassion as well as discernment. Tish Harrison Warren, in a recent Christianity Today article on the topic, observes that deconstructionists—even once they have left the evangelical faith—sometimes “retain the incessant faddishness and marketing gimmickry endemic to it.”⁴ The consumerism that has unfortunately become all too engrained in American Christian sensibilities should itself be deconstructed. At times, it is misidentified elements of faith which become the objects of deconstruction, while those that merit being undone are permitted to live on.

As ECO, we should remain open-eyed to the reality that our history as predominantly white, affluent, and traditional (especially with regards to marriage, gender, and sexual ethics) are a piece with wider ecclesial realities and conflicts that have grieved and pained many deconstructionists. It is possible for us to retain our convictions on Christ’s sovereign lordship over all things while attending to voices that have often been dismissed and overlooked. They may have something to teach us of the ways we have failed to allow Christ’s lordship to dismantle our own idols and false gospels. The church should welcome and embrace conversations around

⁴ Tish Harrison Warren, “The Church Needs Reformation, Not Deconstruction,” Christianity Today, October 19, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november/exvangelical-warren-guide-to-deconstruction-church.html>. One recent and quickly decried example is ex-vangelical Joshua Harris’ offering a \$275 course on deconstruction, which he quickly took down.

deconstruction with a posture of listening and openness. Unfortunately, so often the church doesn't and—like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, clinging to laws and rituals and institutions—rejects God's invitation to repentance and renewal.

But this is not to say that anyone or anything bearing the badge of deconstruction is a guaranteed mouthpiece of gospel truth. When pursued for its own sake and not as a part of God's disciplined pruning, deconstruction itself may become—or be fueled by—other idols, false guides, and misguided pursuits of autonomy and self-actualization. And when one's process of deconstruction leaves no room for reconstruction, and terminates instead with a wholesale rejection of Christ and his pursuit, it should be rightly grieved and mourned. As Harrison Warren notes, it is sadly possible that "Many of those who most vocally deconstruct Christianity jettison a thin version of American fundamentalism and mistake it for the whole tradition."⁵

Even so, it may be the case that many deconstruct not because they have an issue with Jesus and his message of love, but because the church seems so preoccupied with anything but, courting instead numerical growth, political influence, media popularity and institutional power, even to the point of permitting widespread abuse, toxic environments, unexamined racism, and the clinging to dead or dying structures and programs in lieu of sacrificial and imaginative reinvestment. The church in our time has little to lose by considering the potentially prophetic voice of deconstructionists, and to reevaluating—indeed reforming—its own structures and assumptions about what it means and looks like to be Christ's bride in a post-Christendom, post-Covid world. If not, we will have perhaps shown ourselves to have more in common with those who have opted to eschew their faith altogether in a shared resolve to walk in the glow of fires and torches we have set ablaze for ourselves instead of relying in trust on God, even when the unknown path ahead remains dark.⁶

⁵ Warren.

⁶ Isaiah 50:10–11.

Consumerism

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

What was your most recent purchase? Seriously—pause and think about it. What did you buy? What/who was it for? Did you know the person you bought it from, the person who made it, the source? Did the purchase require a human interaction? Did it advance your connection with others and with your environment, or further insulate you from them?

However innocent your most recent purchase, your exchange almost undoubtedly participated in consumer capitalism. Capitalism, roughly defined, is the economic system governed by the ownership of private property (capital) and the exchange of products in the pursuit of profit. In such a system, making enough is not enough. Only exponentially increasing returns will satisfy the bullish craving of the market. The “consumer” part of consumer capitalism identifies when this exchange process is especially fueled by the demand and desire of the one purchasing products: the consumer.

Consumerism has been the object of mounting critique (Squid Games, anyone?),¹ and rightly so. It’s likely the catalyst of mounting inequalities between rich and poor and of a hallmark human vice: greed. And because of this, it would be easy to misidentify consumerism as plain, irreligious materialism: the unspiritual pursuit of more and more physical possessions. But consumerism poses a more sinister threat. Consumerism *is* a religion, one that seeks a kind of false transcendence through detachment from our surroundings. And it’s even one that has infiltrated and colonized our own patterns of faith to bend the knee to its own logics and habits.²

Even within our own congregations, the suspenseful waiting and watching of advent has long been conquered by the buzz of production. Christmas is captive to the gods of the market now, with little time to kneel with awe by the manger.

Because it incentivizes not just profit, but *increasing* profit, consumer capitalism has encouraged processes of exchange that sanitize them of the inefficient human and material connections with the products being distributed. Amazon purchases are an all too easy and yet all too common example here. With the click of a button and ring of a bell, a box arrives on the doorstep with no need to engage in the human friction that slows this process down, let alone of inconvenient and unnecessary awareness of the people and landscapes impacted along the

¹ Arwa Mahdawi, “Netflix’s Squid Game Savagely Satirises Our Money-Obsessed Society – but It’s Capitalism That Is the Real Winner,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2021, sec. Opinion.

² For book treatments on this theme, see William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Eerdmans, 2008), Eugene McCarthy, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Belknap, 2019), and ECO’s own G. P. Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Egypt: A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy* (Cascade, 2016). If your reading list is already too long, listen to each author in the following respective podcasts: The Warden Post, “Being Consumed by Modernity with William T. Cavanaugh,” *Dangerous Ideas*, n.d., <https://podcasts.apple.com/fr/podcast/being-consumed-by-modernity-with-william-t-cavanaugh/id1577565624?i=1000529599913>, “The Enchantments of Mammon,” Harvard University Press, n.d., <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674984615>, Greg Wagenfuhr, “Plundering Egypt: Economics and The Gospel Pt 1,” *Tehom*, n.d.

way. This detachment makes the consumer themselves the sole focal point of their purchases. Consumer purchases can (if not always) become a means of forming one's identity and achieving a sense of transcendence and self-actualization. Home improvement projects are probably a good example here. If you've ever flipped through a home catalog or afforded a house remodel, you may have felt this pressure of projecting your sense of self—and self-worth—on the décor of your home. In a consumer culture, the home is less a space of hospitality and gathering than a canvas for one's own identity, tastes, and status.³ In such an environment, material possessions are less a medium for shared relationship than they are a means for self-creation.

All of this, of course, is at odds with our faith. Or at least, it should be. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of the popular *Jesus and John Wayne*,⁴ made a provocative suggestion at a conference I recently attended. She proposed that what has primarily shaped evangelicalism is not its theological or doctrinal content as much as a consumer culture driven through popularized channels of publishing, radio, film, and television.⁵ She suspects that many generations of American Christians have been disciplined by Christian media into certain political and social views more than they have been disciplined by their own congregations into a life shaped by theological and relational commitments. In other words, Du Mez invites us to consider whether it is the profit-making consumption of Christian media content that has formed and fed us more than our own pastors and congregations. Christianity Today's popular *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast, in delineating the growth of online platforms of certain churches and church leaders, suggests how this trend is only continuing, and bearing dangerous and fragile fruit.⁶

Ironically and poignantly, an act of consumption lies at the center of our faith: the consumption of the broken and blessed body and blood of Christ at communion. But to call this consumption may be misleading; this is not consumption in our capitalistic, commodified sense: one in which products are appropriated and quickly discarded at a distance from the mess and glory of real relationship. Communion is an act of *union* which forms, constitutes, nourishes and unites us, not only with our crucified, risen, reigning and returning lord, but with his body—the church—who is in some deep mystery also part of our physical, biological body, and who together waits for his kingdom to be fully revealed. Not coincidentally, the same meal is also called the “eucharist”, Greek for “giving thanks”. At the Lord's table, we learn that the material gifts God gives us are not to serve as instruments for our self-creation or emblems of autonomy, but as reminders of our relationship with and dependency on him, and as occasion for gratitude.

As Christ's disciples, our true “consumption”—if we can call it that—is about belonging, not self-actualizing or self-fulfillment; about finding our identity in the crucified and risen and returning Christ, not curating our identity through our purchases; about waiting on and for the

³ See Emily Beth Hill, *Marketing and Christian Proclamation in Theological Perspective* (Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2021), especially the concluding chapter.

⁴ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, (Liveright, 2020).

⁵ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, “A Vast Congregation of Consumers: Popular Culture and Cultural Authority in Modern American Evangelicalism” (Intellectual authority and its changing infrastructures in North American and Australian Christianity, 1960s-2010s, Online / Australian Catholic University (Brisbane), n.d.).

⁶ Mike Cospoer, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,” n.d., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>.

one who is the desire of the nations, not seeking cheap satisfaction and thrills that are as destructive as they are fleeting and elusive. Our faith teaches us that physical possessions—when held greedily and clandestinely—may be the death of us.⁷

But when shared openly and eucharistically, material goods can serve as a conduit for community, worship, and witness for the gospel in a world hungry for its message.⁸

But as any pastor of the American West knows, it is at just this point that our churches face what may be their greatest contemporary challenge to in following and belonging to Christ. It is not just our economic habits that are colonized and dictated by consumerism, but our ecclesial sensibilities too. American evangelical Christians have been disciplined into a consumer relation with church, seeking to reduce the friction of human relations and maximize our levels of comfort, efficiency, and identity in our congregations no less than in stores.

This is one reason why at ECO we have chosen to adopt language of covenant partnership over language of membership when speaking of our belonging to local church bodies. The former invokes the biblical language which God uses, reminiscent of marriage, of his relation to his people, which endures through thick and thin; the latter is suggestive of one's relation to a social club—which one is quick to discard when it no longer advances one's personal interests or standing. The former puts on display the upside-down social order that is God's kingdom; the latter the order of this world, which is passing away.

Language is important because it simultaneously reflects and shapes our perception of reality, but our language of covenant partnership will ring hollow if it is not backed by actual life and practice. How—as pastors, sessions, and concerned Christ-followers—do we resist the idolatrous tendency to engage the church as just another product to consume or dispose at will?

I want to close by tentatively proposing a response that may ring counter-intuitively, and maybe even controversially. I want to suggest that the best way to resist consumer culture in our congregations is by not trying to resist it at all; that is, by not trying to convince or coax ambivalent people to stay in our midst. What if, like Jesus and the rich young ruler, we were willing to let people walk away? I'm concerned that the very attempt to try to win those over to the church who already treat it as a consumer will reinforce that consumer relationship and even perpetuate the misperception that the church is a dispenser of religious goods and services and programs instead of the slice of earth where Christ is Lord and from which they can expect the same suffering the world inflicted on him.

In the face of consumerism, the church needs nothing more than the habits and practices she has been given and that have sustained her for the past several thousand years: praying and listening to the apostle's teaching, exhorting one another and sharing possessions, breaking bread together and fasting together, and waiting for their returning Lord. Perhaps the best way to resist consumerism is by doubling down on the basics of being Christ's body, the means and rhythms of which are—to consumerism's dismay—nothing but ordinary.

The hemorrhaging of church members experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic will likely only continue. This is a season of pruning, and a painful one to be sure. After all, the loss of just one sheep is more than enough to concern the shepherd. But as with any pruning, this is

⁷ Luke 12:31–21; Acts 5:1–11.

⁸ Acts 2:42–47.

also an opportunity for growth: not to lengthen our branches or broaden our foliage, but to sink our roots even deeper into the wellsprings coursing beneath us, and wait to bear fruit in due season.

Rethinking Ecclesiology: Church Structure, Ordination, and Church Roles

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

This chapter explores what church leadership roles can be biblically and theologically if we move away from Christendom assumptions. I put forward that the concept of eternally defined offices is not biblical, and that the Bible often lifts up the gifts of individuals for the sake of the wider church body. I suggest that our polity can be used to rethink the role of deacons in a way that turns all those who serve an approved and official function for the church into an accountable role. I also suggest that we begin to reconsider what ordination, clergy, and church roles look like to affirm a variety of functions while deepening our discipleship and mutual accountability by diving deeper into what it could mean for ordination to be rediscovered and defined anew as a *covenant order*.

Priesthood and the Church

Jesus radically reframed human religions. He claims that the temple God will inhabit is a people, not a building.¹ He was described as the final priest whose priestly roles would only ever be taken up by the whole people, and not individual priests.² Access to God is equal in Christ, not mediated through rites or a special caste of ordained priests who were closer to God by virtue of their changed being. Instead, the whole people would be a kingdom and together priests for God to the whole world.³ Jesus ended the priesthood, and both the New Testament and the earliest church had no notion of a priesthood or ordination. There were leaders with specific roles or duties, but none of these constituted a sacred people in distinction from the "laity." But the church later reestablished the priesthood, sacrifices,⁴ and temple buildings. The Protestant Reformation made some attempt to reform this understanding but typically limited themselves to correcting abuses of priests, rather than questioning the whole institutional structure and its assumptions. The result is that Presbyterians, like many other Protestant denominations retain a functional priesthood of "pastors" who are ordained and called "reverend."⁵ There is no suitable theological justification for this, especially as it has taken away from the call for all followers of Jesus to be part of the priestly role of the whole church. The existence of clergy demands that all others are laity. The laity can never be empowered to do the work of ministry (Eph 4:11–13) so long as there is a notion of ordination to a functional

¹ See John 2:19–22 and Paul's understanding of this in 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21, also in 1 Peter 2:5.

² The book of Hebrews is unique in calling Jesus a priest. He is of the "order of Melchizedek" which meant he was not part of a human priestly lineage and Hebrews makes no indication that Jesus established a priestly order of his own.

³ Revelation 1:6, 5:9–10 quoting Exodus 19:6.

⁴ In many older understandings of the Eucharist and money gifts of tithes and offerings.

⁵ *Reverend* is someone who is revered, or held in high honor.

priesthood.⁶ Thus, in order for the saints of God to rise up again and reclaim their inheritance as coheirs of Christ's kingdom and ministry, the clergy-laity distinction must be dismantled in theology and in practice. To do that, we have to revisit the concept of ordination to an "office."

What is an Office?

The word "office" has a very long history in the Christian tradition whose meaning has largely been lost to a type of modern building where commercial work takes place. Office comes from Latin *officium*, which meant any kind of service that one does for another. It then came to mean a type of obligatory service owed by someone because of their social role. In that way, *officium* is related to the Greek *leitourgia* from which we get "liturgy," a word that in the NT simply means "service."

So, the core concept of providing a service can take on a fixed, institutional role. We tend to think of that as an "office" that someone "holds." The president of the United States is an officeholder. The person changes, but the institutional role largely remains.

So it became with the church. Particular kinds of service regularly rendered came to be set into fixed roles with people who hold such roles. For example, the New Testament concept of the "elder" is not unique to the Bible and Paul was not inventing such a role in the Pastoral Epistles. Many traditional tribal societies have been governed by a council of elders who convene only when needed, and this was true of the Jews.

How Do Offices Form?

Official roles develop in a social process of institutionalization. Institutions are human inventions that exist by convention. They develop out of repetitious activities that a community needs. Institutions are thus a social way of making things somewhat automatic.⁷ Institutions take things off of everyone's plate. So, there's the institution of mealtimes and a social role of cook. Someone can specialize to fill the office of cook so that everyone else can do other things. There's a quality and efficiency benefit to making an institution out of dinner and employing a specialized cook. But that doesn't have to be the case. In some modern families, many people cook at various times so that there is no office or role of cook. This can give a sense of freedom to people who might otherwise not want to inhabit predetermined roles. Relationships that are lived out by only inhabiting set roles may be felt to be inhibiting. Perhaps a wife is tired of cooking after years of doing it daily and wants to take courses for an advanced degree. Perhaps a husband is tired of being "breadwinner" and wants to stay home with the children while his wife works. Fixed gender roles might be felt to be inhibiting to this family, and might be out of date, and no longer relevant. Obsolete roles become burdensome and can inhibit the institution from flourishing in its current context. But if the family always eats fast food because no one wants to cook, their family may not flourish in their physical or relational health.

⁶ See Gregg, Tom, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, (Baker 2019), Chapter 4.

⁷ See Berger, Peter and Luckman, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Anchor, 1967).

The same is true in the church. There are official roles that form based on repetitious activities which can be specialized. Building cleaning and maintenance are often quickly made into the offices of sexton, custodian, or janitor. But roles long established may become obsolete. Many churches had separate women's groups that specialized in more traditionally feminine activities like quilting, sewing, cooking. I served a church with two women's "circles," one for quilting, and one that had no special activity, that ran their own accounting and meetings with minutes, clerks, treasurers, and Robert's Rules strictly followed. These groups were made of only elderly women who had failed to attract those born after 1950 to inhabit these social roles. To force churches to have quilting circles as a regular office would obviously not be beneficial in a large number of contexts today. Could the same be true of pastors, elders, and deacons as traditionally defined?

What is Ordination?

It's easy to talk about women's circles as a passing social institution in the church. But what if we ask the question about core church functions? Where does ordination come from and what does it mean?

To "ordain" means "to put in order" and comes from the Latin *ordinare*, with the same root word for order. Monks joined an order, just as priests did. An "order" was simply something customary, an institution or role that had developed. Ordination simply means to introduce someone to a customary way of managing things.

But "ordain" came to have a particularly religious or priestly meaning at some point in ecclesial history. English uses of the word "ordain" in the OT typically translate a verb "to fill the hand of" someone.⁸ Perhaps the image of filling a hand was putting a sceptre or other symbolic instrument of office-holding power in their hand.⁹ There are no NT examples of ordination.

What matters is the kind of order that someone is being set into. In the OT, priests were "ordained" into a priesthood by being "consecrated," or set apart. Like a cook being taken away from other duties to focus on cooking, so it is with a priest doing priestly duties. But what's different with a priest is that, in traditional societies, an official priesthood was more of a social caste than it was simply a role. A social caste is a whole-life functional identity with totally different rules pertaining to each. Priests were set apart from common life activities and were not allowed to do certain regular activities. The whole tribe of Levi was not allowed to own land and thus grow food or participate in the regular economy of Israel. They had to eat from tithes and offerings.

The notion of a priesthood is thus very important in talking about ordination. There can be no real ordination without consecration, without joining a specialist whole-life role that involved special rules to keep a priest clean from the dirt of daily life or and separate from regular economic activity. Under Christendom Europe, the church had just such a priesthood with the

⁸ See Exodus 28:41, 29:9, 29:35; Leviticus 8:33; Numbers 3:3.

⁹ The only other use that sheds any light here is in 2 Kings 9:24 when Jehu "fills his hand" with a bow and arrow to shoot Joram.

sacrament of ordination to be pursued to the exclusion of marriage and family life.¹⁰ Being ordained involved an *ontological transformation*, in which a person's being was transformed, a view still held by some Anglicans and Roman Catholics today. Priests were no longer the same kind of human as everyone else. Ordination was a kind of transformation that enabled a person to stand between the gulf between God and regular humans as a representative of both. Europe in the Middle Ages was a caste-based society in which the nobility owned land, created laws, and went to war, the church and its priests maintained order between heaven and earth, and the peasantry did all the regular economic work. It was intended to be a harmony of those who rule/fight, those who pray, and those who work.

In the Reformation this view was significantly challenged both from within the church and from both the peasantry and nobility. We might even see the period from 1500 until 2000 as a long process of working to eliminate this caste system and the institutions that made it up: the nobility, priesthood, and feudal land system. We've replaced those with elected governments and corporations. We believe today that a person can choose what social role he or she fills in adult life and have a universal system of education to prepare children to make such choices for themselves. In this world, priesthood is as outmoded as kings. Indeed, we could say that those two go hand in hand. The triumph of the people over the king and the priest was an explicit narrative of the French Revolution. Liberty in the Enlightenment required the elimination of both nobility and clergy.

During the time of the Reformation, theology was changing too. Luther challenged the priesthood as a special caste with special rules. Priests became pastors or ministers and got married. The theology of the Word rose to equal that of the Sacrament in Lutheran and Reformed theologies, and this demanded a different kind of service of the minister. Many anabaptists took this theology much further and dissolved special roles in churches and allowed anyone moved by the Spirit to preach, as some also fought to overthrow kingdoms and priesthods in the flesh with peasant rebellions.

While it's easy to see how the Anabaptist position might make more sense in modern society, and aspects have been widely adopted in Evangelicalism, there are aspects to the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed perspectives rooted in Scripture that should not be lost. It is not quite as simple as saying, "let's just get rid of offices and institutions."

Biblical Offices and Orders

Describing systematic truths about leadership in the people of God is difficult because of the diversity of leadership structures represented. There are mysterious priests like Melchizedek who have no "order." The patriarchs act in priestly ways. Moses, although not a priest, certainly acts as much like one as his brother Aaron, who is the head of the legitimate priesthood. The

¹⁰ Though contrary to common belief, this was a relatively later development at least in practice. Clerical marriage was forbidden as early as the 3rd century, but until the 7th century non-bishop priests who were married before ordination were allowed to retain their wives. This rule was rarely respected, and clergy marriage and concubinage was common into the 11th century. Gies, Frances and Joseph, *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages*, (Harper, 1987), 58–59, 134–135.

judges sometimes have priestly roles, as with Samuel. There is, of course, an official priesthood centered around the temple with a clear hierarchy with ever increasing specificity of official descent from Levi to Aaron to Zadok. Prophets go alongside the priesthood, but their role changes and they sometimes perform ministry to even the enemies of the people of God. The Old Testament was written over a significant portion of time and it reveals the changing institutions and roles of ancient Israel. One thing we see clearly is that God holds accountable all leaders to his covenant, even as they lead in vastly different ways for different purposes. We also see that there are no eternal offices established by God in an unchanging institution. The history of the kings is relatively short. The prophets change from wandering charismatic bands who are looked on with some suspicion, to becoming established court advisors, as with Nathan to David, or even Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. The priesthood changes too as the locations, vessels, and roles of worship change.

But our Reformational forebears viewed things differently. Calvin, as with others of his time, speaks of Christ as holding the office of prophet, priest, and king. For him, the "offices" Christ held were defined by their purposes, or ends, rather than by their historical manifestations. So, Christ serves in the role of prophet as one who reveals God's will, the role of priest by making peace between God and his people, and the role of king as the *spiritual* authority over the church. Calvin did not believe Jesus made claims of the kind earthly kings did (mistakenly, I think many modern NT scholars would argue).¹¹

When we consider the New Testament, the water gets even more muddy. First of all, Jesus could not rightly be qualified to be prophet, priest, and king, since he could not both be of the tribe of Judah for the kingship and the tribe of Levi for the priesthood. So, the author of Hebrews bypasses the whole Levitical-Aaronic priestly tradition by calling him a "priest according to the order of Melchizedek."¹² Further, Jesus proclaims the destruction of the temple and the rebuilding of it in his "body" which becomes the church. Although the "great high priest," his plan is to tear down the temple! Jesus's main claim in the gospels was that he was the king of the Jews, though he also considered himself a prophet.¹³ However, the very role and character of prophecy had changed dramatically since the days of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But Jesus is also a Rabbi, and fulfilled many of the roles and expectations of Jewish Rabbis in that period of time. He was also "messiah" which was also a somewhat defined role in the Second Temple period with imaginations inspired by the liberation that Judas Maccabeus and his family accomplished a few generations previously.

Rather than claiming Jesus fulfils specific offices, it might be more helpful to describe the functions Jesus played in his ministry of which the manifestations were in his time understood as prophetic, priestly, and kingly. For example, we could debate which office has the role of making peace. The priest makes peace through sacrifice. The king makes peace through diplomacy or victory in war and administers peace through justice and law. The prophet makes peace through announcing the Word of God in judgment and to repentance. Christ is a sacrifice, the victorious

¹¹ *Institutes*, Book II, Chapter 15.

¹² Hebrews 5–7.

¹³ E.g. in Matthew 13:57.

king making peace by slaying the enemy of sin and death, the ruling king of a new covenant of peaceful kingdom life, and the one who calls for repentance and reconciliation. In other words, Jesus's ministry is *unique* and the categories of human institutional offices break down in him. God enters into human institutions, but they cannot contain him. Jesus does not *legitimize* human offices by occupying them, he bursts these offices asunder. The priestly, prophetic, and kingly roles all come to an end in Christ. He is the final word that sums up the law and the prophets,¹⁴ the king of kings to whom all authority *in heaven and on earth* belongs,¹⁵ and the priest who destroys the whole logic of sacrifice.¹⁶

It is a long-running debate as to the way in which Jesus passed some of his authority on to his followers. Did Jesus establish the office of the papacy in Peter, or did he pick Peter as his key follower as Elisha followed Elijah?¹⁷ In other words, did Jesus establish an eternal institutional office that Peter was the first to occupy, or did he envisage a more organic charismatic identification of successors? Did he establish an office of which Peter was the first officer, or was Peter unique in this early position as seen in the time of the Judges? Roman Catholics have argued the former. Protestants have tended to argue that it was Peter's confession that would be the bedrock of the church, not him personally. Clearly Jesus is granting Peter the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 16:19 ("I give to you" is singular), in a way similar to the function of blessing and cursing given to Abraham in his call in Genesis 12:3. Somehow Peter was the new patriarch like Abraham, but was that the establishment of the patriarchate?¹⁸ Again, Protestants have roundly said, "No" where Catholics have said, "Yes." Thus, the Pope is the vicar of Christ for them, filling the earthly throne of Christ as Christ sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

In any case, the apostles were generally regarded as having greater authority, and those of Jerusalem foremost among them. James, Jesus' brother, seems to have had great authority as well, seen by his delivery of the findings of the council of Jerusalem.¹⁹ But again, was he an office-holder or unique in his authority due to his relationship with Jesus?

Whatever the case, the church after this first generation maintained these apostles as the key link to any further authority in the church, and all those who were to lead thereafter would have to be ordained in a way that could be traced back to the original apostles. Paul is an outlier here. He claims to be an apostle chosen by Jesus himself, that is, by a vision of Jesus after his ascension. It is no wonder he was viewed with some suspicion before the other apostles got to know him well. And yet, Paul still had mentorship and years of preparation before he began his public ministry. But the concept of "apostolic succession" has continued to this day, though different traditions debate how it works. Does it require the direct laying-on of hands in

¹⁴ Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 1:1–2.

¹⁵ I.e. Jesus is not just a spiritual king as Calvin argues, but the rightful king over all creation and all dominions. Those that do not submit to his kingship are usurpers and rebels. His mission is to reconcile heaven and earth, as his own prayer indicates. See Matthew 6:10, 28:18; Philippians 2:9–11.

¹⁶ So Isaiah 1:11–20; and Psalm 51 which see acting justly as the prerequisite for sacrifice to work... even though sacrifice is ostensibly for placating the wrath of an offended God. If justice were done, what use are sacrifices? The God of the Bible cannot be appeased with bloodshed, and so he came to have his own blood shed. See also Hebrews 10:12.

¹⁷ Matthew 16:15–19.

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that "pope" is simply a Latin form of "father" and thus similar to Orthodox patriarchs.

¹⁹ Acts 15:13–21.

ordination by people in a direct line back to the apostles? Or is the confession, the beliefs, of the apostles the important point? One establishes a genealogical office-holding line, the other does not. Thus, the Bible is not explicitly clear on Jesus's intentions, nor was the first generation church itself clear on how it was organizing itself. I would suggest it most likely that leadership roles began organically with those nearest to Christ taking authority, and then with the need to identify successors, institutional roles began to develop.

A Survey of New Testament "Offices"

The NT speaks also of the following roles or functions people perform: overseers (*episkopoi* or bishops), elders (*presbuteroi*), servants (*diakonoï*), apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers. Conspicuously missing from this list are roles that were present among the Jews the church came out of, like rulers (*archontoï*), priests (*hieroi*), and scribes (*grammateoi*).

Notable also for its sparsity is a title for "minister" or "pastor" being used as the most common officer in a church. Shepherds (which are the same as pastors) are only mentioned in Ephesians 4, and no one is specifically addressed as one, apart from Jesus.

Overseers: The Holy Spirit makes someone an overseer who has the care of people of God.²⁰ Paul and Timothy address overseers and servants (deacons) in the opening to the letter to the Philippians.²¹ Paul repeats a common saying, "If anyone desires overseeing, he or she desires a good work."²² He goes on to explain that such an overseer must be above reproach, monogamous, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, and have excellent character.²³ This implies that overseers serve as community leaders, have a public and visible role, serve as role-models, and actively engage in teaching. Paul specifically mentions the ability to manage a household, which in those days meant far more than it does today, suggesting that the overseer was wise in the business affairs of an extended patriarchal family of the day. Indeed, Paul calls overseers in Titus 1:7, "God's steward" a word (*oikonomos*) from which we get "economist," i.e. someone who can manage (*nomos* = law) a household (*oikos*). Clearly Paul thinks there should be leaders who have this sort of practical responsibility.

Finally, 1 Peter talks about Christ as our overseer and shepherd, and extends these functions to local church leaders, whom he calls *presbuteroi*, or elders.²⁴ These elders should eagerly shepherd the flock, not being domineering or proud, but as humble Christ-like examples or role models. Younger disciples should be subject to these elders.

²⁰ Acts 20:28.

²¹ Philippians 1:1.

²² 1 Timothy 3:1. My translation. Note that many English translations use the word "office" here, but that is an interpretative addition not found in the Greek.

²³ 1 Timothy 3:2–7.

²⁴ 1 Peter 2:25, 5:1–5.

Elders: It is fitting, based on 1 Peter 5, that Presbyterian tradition has merged the office of bishop with that of elder. Elders perform the functions of overseeing, which are the function of shepherding, which we'll discuss below.

The church inherited this style of elder-leadership from the Jews of their time, who themselves inherited this from time immemorial. But the church didn't mindlessly inherit this tradition, the Jewish authorities in the gospels are often listed among other offices like the chief priests, scribes, and rulers. The church evidently did not continue these roles. There is a notable absence of the kind of rulers and hierarchical offices that were present in Second Temple Judaism.

Paul appointed elders for every church he ministered to in Acts 14:23. In this we get a picture of apostles as something of super-elders with extraordinary authority to appoint people to be in charge of other churches. Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem and consulted with the apostles and elders there, implying that there were elders who were not also apostles with authority in Jerusalem.²⁵

As to the role of elders we get a glimpse that they were involved in overseeing or managing local churches, as well as preaching and teaching. But as 1 Timothy 5:17 implies, not every elder did engage in preaching and teaching. James believes that the elders should engage in prayer for the sick.²⁶ The author of the letters of 2 and 3 John calls himself "the elder," implying that part of his ministry was teaching and correcting through letter writing, implying a physical distance from the ones over whom he had teaching authority.

And finally, in Revelation, John has a vision of 24 elders casting their crowns before the throne of Jesus. This, of course, shows their sign of eternal submission to Jesus from whom all their authority derives. They are often falling on their faces and worshipping God.²⁷ Their number could imply double the tribes of Israel to indicate the inclusion of the Gentiles in their midst. But it seems clear that the elders represent their people and their churches as representatives of all the people of God. That they wear crowns also indicates that authority had been entrusted to them, which they were now returning to its source.

Shepherd/Pastor: While this is the most common modern understanding of church authority, there are no examples of anyone being named as a shepherd apart from Jesus himself. That is, the title "shepherd" seems to belong to Jesus alone. Only one verse, Ephesians 4:11, indicates that God gave to the church shepherds. However, there is no elaboration on what this could entail in terms of institutional role or function.

What we can say about shepherding in the Bible is that it is a kingship metaphor that is also attested in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The idea of a nation as a flock in need of management by a shepherd is thus a common understanding of the function of a king. And yet, as Psalm 23 makes clear, this idea of God as a shepherd is not simply about herding strays, but about abundant provision. Psalm 23, as a Psalm of David clearly casts his own kingship in the

²⁵ Acts 15.

²⁶ James 5:14.

²⁷ Revelation 4:10, 5:8, 5:14, 7:11, 11:16, 19:4. "Falling on one's face" is simply the Hebrew word for worship. Worship itself is an act of showing submission to an authority.

model of God's, and thus Psalm 23 would likely have been less personal-devotional in ancient Israel, and more teaching about the proper role of an Israelite/Judahite king. It's about what the people should expect of their king as the king expects it of God himself.

What that also means is that the function noted in Ephesians 4:11, as with 1 Peter 2, is less about the caring ministries we've come to associate with "pastoral ministry" and more about authority to gather the flock and provide for it.

Deacons/Servants/Ministers: The word "deacon" is perhaps the most misleading of this group because it's the only one that isn't translated out of Greek. In the New Testament, a deacon refers to any person who performs an official function of a servant. There are other words in biblical Greek that refer to servants of a specific social caste (like slaves, *douloi*), but *diakonos*²⁸ likely refers to any person who performs a function of service regardless of their class.²⁹ The Latin cognate of *diakonos* is *minister*, which invites further confusion as we tend to use "minister" interchangeably with "pastor." Deacon and minister are words that refer mostly to table-service and thus have come to be associated with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper where a minister administers (a servant serves) the meal. In Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, for example, deacons have a specific role with regard to administering the sacrament and have no special role of serving the poor, for example.

There is no indication in the New Testament that "Deacon" was necessarily an office. Rather, acting as a servant (*diakonos*) is expected and described of all Christians.³⁰ The following people are named as servants with the word *diakonos* in the NT: earthly authorities,³¹ Christ,³² the whole church,³³ Phoebe,³⁴ Apollos,³⁵ Paul,³⁶ Tychicus,³⁷ Timothy,³⁸ and Epaphras.³⁹ From the diversity of this list we can see that the term *diakonos* is used in a generic sense and is often translated into English with a variety of words like servant, deacon, and minister according to the choice of the translators. It is from 1 Timothy 3 that the church established the diaconate as a proper office, since it seems that Paul there gives qualifications for a role in parallel to that of an overseer. However, since it is appropriate to translate *diakonos* with "minister" or "servant" these qualifications might better be understood as pertaining to anyone who performs any function of service for the church. It is commonly understood that the diaconate was established in Acts 6. There the twelve apostles were not able to both preach, teach, and "serve tables."

²⁸ *Diakonos* does not break down etymologically into dia-konos (through the dust) but derives from *dioko*, a verb meaning to run after, according to BDAG.

²⁹ The New Testament seems to have a unique way the word *diakonos* is used. See the TDNT entry on *diakonos*.

³⁰ See for example Matthew 20:26, 23:11; Mark 9:35, 10:43; John 12:26.

³¹ Romans 13:4.

³² Romans 15:8,

³³ 2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4.

³⁴ Romans 16:1.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:5.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 11:23, Ephesians 3:7, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:25.

³⁷ Ephesians 6:21, Colossians 4:7.

³⁸ Philippians 1:1.

³⁹ Colossians 1:7.

They therefore asked that the church elect seven men to serve food to the widows.⁴⁰ This story of delegating tasks to focus on specific functions is reminiscent of Moses' delegation of judgment by the suggestion of Jethro.⁴¹ But although these men—Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus—were appointed to serve the daily distribution to the widows, we find that both Stephen and Philip play important roles later in Acts. Acts describes Stephen as full of the Holy Spirit, performing many miracles, and speaking with incredible wisdom. Stephen was then martyred after his sermon on defense of the faith. Philip⁴² is also later described as preaching Christ in Samaria, performing miracles, and casting out demons. He also was sent southward where he baptized the treasurer of the Ethiopian queen Candace. Philip is later also called "the evangelist" while still being "one of the seven."⁴³

Stephen and Philip certainly demonstrate that if they were appointed to an official task of serving the widows so the apostles could focus on teaching, they weren't constrained by that role and performed many of the actions of the apostles as well. This means it's difficult to take Acts 6 as establishing an eternal office of the diaconate, rather it is a documentation of the original apostles lifting up others to positions of authority to continue the ministry when the duties became too much for the original group.

A final word about "ministers" is that Paul once calls himself a "minister (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified in the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴ This is the only usage of this term for a person in the Bible, and Paul is speaking as though he's bringing Gentiles to the people of God as an offering. This is metaphorical, of course, in the sense that he is not ordained as clergy to bring a people group to God. It is a statement of how he understands his own mission as similar to that of a temple servant bringing a gift to the altar (and not the priest sacrificing it!). Paul's single use of this term highlights its rarity in the New Testament, that there are no priestly ministers established institutionally in the church of the New Testament.

Apostles: Apostles are "sent ones" or "messengers." The title is reserved for original followers of Jesus, with Paul being the exception. The basic understanding of this is that Jesus appointed twelve trusted friends who would announce the coming of the kingdom of God with him. They are the ones Jesus sends into the world to proclaim his good news. Paul makes a big deal out of his apostleship and how he can truly be counted among the original twelve since it seems his claims of authority were often tested.⁴⁵

Here we see how the office and the function can become confusing. There are many sent-ones or messengers. In one sense, apostles have a similar function of evangelists. However, "Apostle" was clearly used as a position of supreme authority in the NT church, and was reserved for a very small group of people who were directly appointed by Jesus himself. But others aspired

⁴⁰ The seven are not given an official title. The verb in the phrase "to serve tables" in 6:2 is *diakoneo*, a common verb used throughout the NT that should not be read as the formation of an office.

⁴¹ See Exodus 18.

⁴² Is this the same Philip named as Jesus' disciple who is also appointed as a servant by the apostles? It is not known.

⁴³ Acts 21:8.

⁴⁴ Romans 15:16.

⁴⁵ See for example 1 Corinthians 9:2.

to use this title and authority, whom Paul calls false.⁴⁶ Paul names apostles as being the first given by God to the church.⁴⁷

Thus, of all words for NT offices, apostle is most clearly an official title, and yet, it is not clear that it was passed on to anyone in a second generation. This would mean it is not an institutional office occupied by people like Paul and Peter, but a title unique to those people who had directly learned from Jesus himself.

Prophets: Prophets are the second group God has appointed in the church.⁴⁸ Although obviously deriving from the OT tradition, prophets in the NT are understood rather differently. Jesus sees himself as a prophet, and many tried to identify both John the Baptist and Jesus as prophets like Elijah. Jesus even says that John is "more than a prophet."⁴⁹ It isn't until Acts 11:27 that we see prophets arise in the NT. Prophets are generally believed to speak revelations of the divine or hidden reality, perhaps even of the future. When Jesus is blindfolded and hit, his abusers mock him by demanding he use divine powers to say who hit him.⁵⁰ Thus, what prophets all have in common is an ability to speak of something not readily available to everyone. There can be false prophets, of course. More than any other of these biblical functions or offices, that of prophet is most easily falsified. A true prophet reveals words from the Holy Spirit, and these are often words of God's judgment. Hence the unpopularity of prophets as truth-tellers. But whereas in the OT there are at times court-appointed prophets like Nathan, there does not seem to be a significant institutional or official role for prophets in the NT church. In Paul's experience prophetic gifts seem to be relatively common among the churches he visited. Perhaps more than any other function, prophecy is hard to institutionalize into roles, since it entirely depends on the Holy Spirit. This made Christianity somewhat unique among pagan religions which often had temple-based oracles who spoke under the influence of some spirit to reveal divine words, and whose counsel was sought by people of all walks of life, including emperors.

Evangelist: This office-word is used only three times in the NT, once of Philip, once for Timothy, and once in Paul's description of the people God gave to the church.⁵¹ Of course, an evangelist is someone who tells the good news. Not having many examples of this as an institutional office, we must assume it was simply a function that most people were doing, though some more remarkably than others.

Preacher: Along with evangelist should go "preacher" (*kerux*/κηρυξ and *katangeleus*/καταγγελεὺς). A *kerux* is really more of a herald than what we might think of someone as a professional expository speech-maker. In the world of the New Testament there were rhetoricians, people who were professional speech-givers, politicians, and lawyers were trained

⁴⁶ As in 2 Corinthians 11–12.

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:28.

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:28.

⁴⁹ Luke 7:26.

⁵⁰ Matthew 26:68.

⁵¹ Ephesians 4:11.

in this art, and the word is never used of Christians in the NT.⁵² A *kerux* is a person appointed to deliver official public messages, like a town-crier. The term is rare in the NT, used only of Paul about himself,⁵³ of Noah the "herald of righteousness,"⁵⁴ and of used of Paul as he talked of Jesus among the philosophers in Athens.⁵⁵

The title of the role "preacher" is rare, and this suggests that it was not understood as a specific office that any one person held in the NT church. Rather, because its related verb "preach" or "proclaim" (*kerusso*) and the related noun of "preaching" (*kerygma*) are relatively common in the NT, it is reasonable to conclude that the activity of preaching was widespread but not institutionalized in a role. And as a role, it was probably more related to announcing good news and truth telling than it was clever turns of phrase in polished speeches designed to convince people of something. Paul himself makes this distinction in defense of his ministry, suggesting that he is not a rhetorician or orator, but a herald.⁵⁶

Teacher: Teacher refers to the most highly institutionalized or customary role among all those used in the NT of the church. Teacher corresponds to the Jewish rabbi, and was frequently used among the Greeks and Romans of their own teachers. The most frequent title when people addressed Jesus was as "teacher." In Jesus' time, teachers often developed their own following of disciples and schools organized more or less organically around famous teachers and rabbis. Paul was himself a student of Gamaliel, a "law-teacher" and a Pharisee.⁵⁷ Famous schools of Rabbinic Judaism were formed around the time of Jesus' life in the figures of Hillel, Shammai, and Akiva. Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel and president of the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus' death.

But although rabbis and philosopher-teachers were well-established roles in Jesus' time, they were not governed by accreditation agencies, granted degrees of achievement or qualification. They were rather wise people who garnered a following and sometimes had influence in the courts of the powerful.⁵⁸ This was a role teachers would play for millennia until the founding of official institutional schools that were not centered around specific individuals. The point is, even though "teacher" was an established conventional role, it was not institutionalized, and it does not seem that people would have seen themselves as "ordained" by an institutional body to the role of "teacher." Instead, they put themselves forward, or were put forward by friendly elders as wise teachers, and then gained a following. Indeed, a disciple is a follower of a teacher.

⁵² St. Augustine of Hippo taught rhetoric, but on becoming a Christian denounced the field as teaching people how to convince others of something regardless of whether it was true or not. See his *Confessions*.

⁵³ 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11.

⁵⁴ 2 Peter 2:5.

⁵⁵ Acts 17:18.

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 2.

⁵⁷ See Acts 5:34, 22:3.

⁵⁸ For example, Aristotle became the teacher of Alexander the Great.

Implication 1: New Testament Functions, Not Institutional Blueprint

One possible conclusion one could make from all of this is that the New Testament church was not institutionally stable with concretized roles or offices that people were elected to hold. This institutionalization came after the first couple generations of believers, and with it came changes in how church was practiced. We can reasonably conclude that the Bible, therefore, does not contain an institutional blueprint for churches or even church offices. But we can positively say that the New Testament consciously did not set up a new priesthood or a new temple-like institution which would be led by a caste of specialists.

If we cannot look to the Bible for institutional blueprints, what do we do with the institutional forms and roles, and what do we do with the church? A few options may be considered:

1. The Originalist option: Condemn the institutional church and try to recover an organic early church. The option would seek to return to house churches without clergy, or perhaps try to recreate the church described in Acts 2.
2. The Principled option: Find principles we can extract out of the Bible to inform our modern practice. A modern example of this would be the use the list found in Ephesians 4 (APEST) to establish what roles or functions the church ought to have. A classic example would be identifying the three offices of Christ and applying those to the church, as our own Essential Tenets do.
3. The Genealogical option: See the NT church as a historically situated entity and see ourselves as heirs of a tradition that must always reevaluate itself. This genealogy tradition can make use of principles, but not in a way that divorces them from historical context.

To my mind, the third option is the most correct. By being familiar with the early church and its own backgrounds, while also being familiar with our own churches and contexts, we are able to ask the question, "What is the mission of God in the midst of all of these changes?" And "What institutional structures best suit that mission today as informed by our tradition?"

1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:13, and APEST

But what about those roles Paul does identify clearly in his two lists in these passages? Paul clearly states that God "has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues" (ESV). Here he seems to be saying that God has set up three roles of apostle, prophet, and teacher, and that there are also miraculous gifts that are not confined to specific roles. We have seen already though, that Paul calls himself an apostle and teacher. So these could not be mutually exclusive roles or offices. In context of 1 Corinthians 12, we see that Paul is enumerating the various gifts, types of service, and activities. His point is to establish that, though many people do many different things for the church and for Jesus, they are united by Christ and his Spirit for the common work.

Likewise we find with Ephesians 4:13 that, although Paul gives a very particular list of what seem to be offices or roles in the apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher, we see again that these cannot be exclusive offices. Rather, these are functions that people play in the building up of the church. Like Paul, some may manifest many of these functions. But what are these functions? While it would be appealing to link them to specific personality types and skills as in the APEST system, it would be more honest to simply list skills that benefit the church in the contexts it inhabits like administration, creative problem-solving, public speaking ability, presentability, wisdom, knowledge, critical thinking, etc. Paul demonstrated all of the APEST functions, and as we saw, being a shepherd in the Bible is often more linked to political leadership than it is what we today call pastoral care.

I believe all of the above shows that God has not established any right institutional form of the church, nor even "biblical principles" for establishing the best institution. Rather, God has given people gifts to perform functions for the building up of the church, the spread of the good news of Jesus, and the revelation of God's kingdom. Evangelism, for example, will look very different in different times and places, and might involve very different personality types and skill sets. The philosophical apologist may find evangelism amongst the urban poor to be challenging, though I personally have always found people experiencing homelessness are often asking some of the biggest questions, perhaps in contrast to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

The NT church was, in many ways, pre-institutional. That had pros and cons. It was nimble, but had many false teachers. It was built on strong personalities with clear claims to authority based on their nearness to Jesus, like Peter's. It spread quickly without needing strategy or vision and mission statements. But it also saw hard questions like how the Gentiles could be involved lead to division. It later failed to prevent Gentile Christianity from overwhelming and quashing Jewish Christians.

The church of the New Testament is not the hero of the story of the Bible, any more than Israel was. But the best teachers of Israel and the Church appealed to wisdom and the council of respected people.

The implication of all this is that wisdom cannot be found by identifying and applying principles or methods for the development of church institutions. Rather, wisdom is comes by maturity in wrestling with Scripture, the state of the church, and the contexts one lives within. In other words, *the church needs the wisdom of the church to create church institutions*. That is, the project of forming and reforming church institutions is a process that happens in a cooperative project of the church, rather than the pet project of a single theologian (like myself) or self-appointed church organization pundit.

Implication 2: Form Follows Function?

A second reasonable implication follows from the first. The church should use institutions as tools, not mistake institutional forms or polity for the church itself. Like any tool, design must begin with function and hoped-for outcomes.

But as with any tool, institutional forms feedback onto the user, transforming those who use the tool in the process. For example, carpentry with unpowered hand tools will lead to

craftsmanship with practice, requiring more effort and time to produce an object. Each piece of lumber would be linked to a tree and selected for specific purposes. But the low output capacity of a traditional carpenter means the skill would be more widespread, meaning society would have more craftspeople who are their own masters. Modern mass production of flat-pack furniture, by contrast, builds out of wood chips, glue, and plastic on computer controlled machines. This leads to a uniformly low quality, low cost, high output, and centralized wealth in factory and furniture store owners. IKEA is low-cost on the sales floor, but that low cost comes with environmental, social, and human impacts necessary to its very structure and existence.

So too with the church. Unchecked authority and a culture that celebrates narcissism will make such leaders rise to the surface and encourage their worst tendencies. Likewise, a polity so focused on checks and balances that it is constantly stuck in a battle for authority will, at best, achieve a form of institutional stability in bickering. Such check-and-balance systems can encourage subtle political maneuvering to get things done. This encourages a culture of secrecy, back-channel dealing, and power struggles, characteristic in previous Presbyterian experience. A mass-production worship factory, an IKEA church, might seemingly produce uniform quality, but the quality will be poor, product lifespans short, and individuals will not be craftspeople-disciples, moving toward mastery through a life-long practice, but consumers who need to constantly receive new inputs to consume. In other words, an IKEA-church structure *creates and feeds upon spiritual consumerism*.

So what tool is right for the church? This is something of a trick question. There is no tool that is right for the church, because the church cannot be made into something distinct from the people. We must join the history of the people of God with Jesus as the king. Doing this is identity and character forming more than it is focused on actions. We cannot manage the church with structures that we anticipate will succeed on their own in producing expected outcomes. That said, there are institutional forms that would make following Jesus more plausible and even normal. There are certainly institutional forms that make following Jesus very unlikely. We must begin, then, with what a follower of Jesus believes and does. If Jesus cared for the "least of these" and the poor, we'll find that institutions that focus heavily on budget and appeasing large donors will not likely be structured in a way most conducive to caring for the poor as people, only as problems to solve with redistribution. But an institution that focuses on equipping individuals to love people outside of their normal social networks as a basic function of a Sunday School or worship service, would encourage both those interested in loving others to join as well as those who are in need of such love.

Giving a full outline of what a potential church institution could look like if we started with an expectation that true discipleship would be normal, not exceptional, would take a whole book. But there are some clear ideas:

- Discipleship is inefficient by nature, since it focuses on personal relationships of accountability and growth. This would require a reasonable shepherd-to-flock-size ratio, perhaps 1 to 100 or something. It would also mean professional skills of disciple-making would be prioritized over public-speaking and corporate management.
- Prioritizing financial outcomes will make a church serve money, not God. Discipleship does not necessitate money, even if it might be facilitated by a moderate income.

- Discipleship would be viewed as our primary act of worship, and the place where time, budget, and facility priorities would land. In other words, 1 hour of songs, prayers, liturgy, sacraments, and preaching per week is not the "tool" someone focused on making disciples would create. That worship-centric church model in a temple-like building was the right tool for Christendom when the church's mission was seen to be the spiritual glue of the stable community.
- Discipleship is as diverse as people are. Our equipping would need to be personalized, even as it contains general content. Disciple making would require diverse gifts, as Paul describes, rather than a singular vision of the "Lead Pastor" and *his* support staff.

Tools can wear out, break, be outdated. Only by turning a tool into an heirloom and museum piece can it be preserved spotless for posterity. That is, only by ceasing to function properly do church institutions gain some vision of a pristine institutional stability. Church institutions and forms should wear out, and should be forged anew.

Implication 3: What Does Ordination and "Reverend" Mean?

The New Testament has no notion of ordination, of the elevation of specific people to a set-apart caste of professional elites. There are no priests. Jesus was the final priest, the priest to end all priests. The "priesthood of all believers" can be a bit misleading. One of the central functions of any priest in any religion at any time in pre-Christian history was to make economic deals with the gods. Priests were go-betweens who could secure blessings, procure curses, promise future success, deliver healing, and buy off the anger of the gods for wounded pride or honor by the fault or sin of the people. Nearly all of these things are represented in Old Testament Judaism as well. Jesus put to death sacrificial logic in his death. God does not make bargains. God does not act as the guarantor on our vows.⁵⁹ So, later Christians have tended to focus on the priestly role of reconciling God and sinners. But here again, Christians do not mediate between God and one another. That role is for Jesus alone.⁶⁰ If we do not bargain, sacrifice, nor mediate, what priestly activities remains that tie Christian clergy to any understandable category of "priest"? Certainly we have access to God through Jesus in a way that would have been reserved for priests. But this access is not predicated on our holding specific social roles, or being ordained. Access to God is through the indwelling of the Spirit within us as God's temple. So, it's less that we become priests, and more that we become God's dwelling place. The separation is finally overcome and no regular access-granting ceremonies are required.

So what is ordination? Traditionally, ordination was the process by which an individual would move from being a layperson to the caste of the clergy. In the New Testament we see the bestowal of authority through the laying-on of hands, but this is given in a general way, such that it communicates the Holy Spirit.⁶¹ The call of the gospel is universal, not to a specialist office.

⁵⁹ Matthew 5:33–36; James 5:12.

⁶⁰ 1 Timothy 2:5.

⁶¹ See Acts 8:18, 9:17; 2 Timothy 1:6.

There is no evidence of "calling" or "vocation"⁶² being used in the New Testament for roles, but only for a call to the gospel of following Jesus.⁶³ Thus, it does not seem that ordination to specific official roles has New Testament evidence or authority.

What do we do with ordination, then? We must equip with wisdom those we are endowing with institutional authority and responsibility. But we should also take full responsibility for this. In Acts 1, the eleven remaining disciples of Jesus replace Judas Iscariot's position by discerning the will of God through casting lots, which was not too different to OT practices of the Urim and Thummim,⁶⁴ a form of divination, discerning the will of God through signs within the created realm. The church has never followed this example of reading signs through dice-throws or coin-toss. Ordination should be based on qualifications, gifts, and should not be accounted as a life-long entry into a specific social caste.

So why do we still have clergy? Why do we call our leaders "Reverend" as though people should *revere* them as though they are especially close to God? After all, few if any of us wear a specific uniform to designate our special social role and function as our forefathers did.⁶⁵ We see remnants of our former culture in legal settings where judges rule their courtrooms, where those gathered must stand when the judge enters and exists the room. Traditional liturgy had the congregation stand for the procession when the revered clergy would enter and exit. Judges wore special vestments, nearly identical in the USA to those traditionally worn by Presbyterian clergy. Judges must be addressed with "your honor," just as clergy would formerly have been addressed with a variety of titles of respect. Our culture has largely seen the breakdown of caste-based specialists who garner institutional respect based on their office-holding. In other words, clergy is functionally defunct when it is no longer a special, set-apart social group of office-holding professionals.

We don't functionally have clergy in society. Secularism has won that long battle of tearing down a caste structure of nobility, clergy, and peasantry. We have the living memory of clergy and echoes of it in our ordination beliefs and rituals, and rarely-worn vestments that now need much explanation for their purposes.

Perhaps we need to rethink the theology and logic of ordination to breathe new theological life into institutional leadership and to equip the laity for the work of ministry.

Application 1: Rethinking Employees and Deacons

Based on all of the above foundations and implications, it makes sense that we reconsider how we understand all roles of authorized service in our church institutions. The variety of gifts and jobs needed for the mission of the church has perhaps never been greater. This has led

⁶² There's no difference between a calling and a vocation. The Latin word *vocatio* simply means "a calling or summons".

⁶³ See Romans 11:29; 1 Corinthians 1:26, 7:20; Ephesians 1:18, 4:1, 4:4; Philippians 3:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 3:1; 2 Peter 1:10.

⁶⁴ See Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 14:41, 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65.

⁶⁵ Interestingly the detachable "dog collar" well known in more casual wear among Anglicans and Roman Catholics was invented by a Presbyterian (Rev. Donald Mcleod of Scotland, 1865).

churches to turn to the secular, business concept of "employment." Employment is a job whose primary accountability structure and reward are the paycheck. This is problematic, because it submits discipleship to the mission of a business. The employee-boss relationship is vastly different to the disciple-teacher relationship. That's not to say that churches can't pay people for work or that they can't hold people accountable for poor performance. It's a question of how we frame these roles and disciple them.

Because the role of the deacon is not specifically defined in the New Testament, beyond someone selected for service to the church, it makes sense to recast all of our church employees as deacons. Deacons are held accountable for character, for belief and faithfulness to the gospel. Practically speaking, deacons are held accountable to the elders of the church. This can be delegated, of course. But paid or unpaid servants of the church could now be put into the same general category of servants who perform authorized functions for the church.

Youth leaders, worship leaders, custodians, and choir members could all be treated as deacons and actively disciplined as they serve the mission of making disciples. Speaking as a former church custodian in my teens, I would have relished the idea that I was not an employee, but a deacon, someone whose work was valued for how it contributed to the mission of the church. I would also have welcomed the accountability structure of discipleship rather than simply performance reviews. This would help create a loyalty and teamwork far beyond what the idea of employment could otherwise do, as well as opportunities for advancement or role-changes based on those in authority getting to know these deacons and assessing their gifts. Church institutions whose membership tends to be limited to a narrow socioeconomic class could also use these deacon-custodian (or other) roles as a way of diversifying and empowering those who otherwise might feel themselves below the station of the church members.

ECO's Polity is already established to allow a degree of flexibility in the area of deacons by not specifying what exact function they are to play.

Application 2: A Thought Experiment on a Covenant Order Replacing Ordination.

If ordination is general, if clergy is not rooted in the NT and now socially defunct, and if the function of "pastor" is one of the least-well defined in the New Testament, perhaps it is time to rethink what being a pastor means. This section reintroduces the concept of the covenant *order* that replaces ordination (though recall that "ordination" most basically means "joining an order"). Obviously this offers only sketchy beginnings of some ideas that need long-term consideration by many diverse and wise people, and ultimately the whole church body.

Problems with "Pastor"

Many issues have arisen that have transformed the role of the pastor into performing many functions not normally or historically part of the role of a pastor, like that of "pastor as CEO." This has led to a large gulf between professional training in seminaries and the professional expectations in the field. While it is easy to criticize seminary for not preparing

students for "reality" it is equally worth reconsidering the "reality" that has become the modern pastorate.

When the church had few urban cathedral cities that had bishops (overseers) of a diocese made of largely rural parishes, a unified training for a unified job generally made sense. The role of the country vicar was well-defined with clear expectations. These were shepherds of villages or distinct neighborhoods that could be fairly well-known and served in personalized ways even with standardized worship services. The contextualization happened through personal relationship rather than in worship. With rapid industrialization and urbanization, the population density and their mobility transformed both urban and rural churches. People moved into socio-economically segregated neighborhoods, and this meant that congregations themselves started to become more segregated (though obviously this happened long before when castles and large estates had their own private/family churches). The face of ministry was changing, but church structures and equipping weren't. This led people like John Wesley to break the rules to preach outside to masses of working-class people in areas he wasn't allowed to preach.

We now live in an age of heightened ministry diversity. Now it is not only socioeconomic and rural/urban, but race, ethnicity, language, generation, and political allegiance diversities that entice churches to cater to the needs and expectations of subgroups. It often does this best through parachurch ministries that are highly contextualized and equip their leaders for precise tasks.

While seminaries and other training groups have started to see the need for diverse routes of professional equipping, the reality is, we're still stuck in a Christendom vision of the church as a temple with a professional clergy whose primary role is to perform somewhat standardized worship services.

The problem with "pastor" is simply that it is a catch-all term now used to indicate a clergy member without specifying what function they are expected to play. But "pastor" is a function-word, not a generic clergy-office word. So, multi-staff churches have a variety of specialist pastors, many of whom may not be doing much of any pastoral work. While at the same time, a single-pastor church requires that single pastor to do a wide variety of jobs. And because ordination is functionally a generic inclusion in a professional guild, ordination in itself includes no information about the gifts of the pastor and how best he or she might contribute to the work of the church.

Minister of Word and Sacrament, and Discipline

Pastors have often been defined as those authorized to preach the word and administer the sacraments. That word "administer" contains "minster" within it. As we saw above, "minister" is a Latin version of *diakonos*, or servant. In Latin, the *minister* is mini, a lesser or humble person whose role is defined by serving rather than being served. In Presbyterianism, the pastor was authorized to perform the sacraments due to a higher level of training and accountability than any other officers had. It wasn't someone's status as *reverend* that made them valid ministers of word and sacrament, it was the covenant that committed them to responsibility and accountability. There is wisdom here. We reserve the most public and formative roles of ministry to those most worthy of being entrusted with this high responsibility by also guarding them with the highest standards and structures of accountability. The restriction

of some roles to specially entrusted people is a major way that a community shows value for something. Allowing anyone to do any function in church might seem egalitarian, but it necessarily devalues that function. While we want prayer and Bible reading to be celebrated for all people, interpretation in teaching requires training, skill, and accountability.

From Clergy to A Covenant Order of Disciples

One potential solution to the problem of the clergy is that we should reconsider it—not as a change in social role or ontological being that accompanies priesthood—but as the joining of a Christian order with lifelong vows. Rather than being given exalted status as clergy, this is the taking up of a yoke (as the stole traditionally symbolizes). But it is a being yoked-together as an order of people who specially devote their lives to serving Christ rather than primarily seeking worldly successes in other careers.

A Covenant Order of Disciples would involve taking vows before others in the order separately to those in particular congregations. It would involve structures of accountability outside of local churches. It would involve expectations beyond job performance. It would mean all members of the covenant order are expected to seek the good of the order just as much as of their local church. We might even take up a special way of dressing to symbolize our primary commitment to a covenanted life set apart for service to Jesus—a habit. Much of this should sound fairly familiar to Presbyterians, as it is not too dissimilar from our heritage, even as it seeks to recover some aspects that were lost with the anti-monastic reaction of the Reformation. And it ought to sound like ECO is already prepared for just such an idea of a covenanted order... it's in our name. Perhaps it's time to consider how to make that aspect of our name a reality.

The Problem of "Commissioned Lay Pastors" and Money

Commissioned Lay Pastors are clearly an institutional necessity in our time, and many positive stories have come out of our CLP cohorts. It is wonderful to see people who otherwise would have never stepped forward for ordination be encouraged in their gifts for ministry. But the concept of the CLP is a theological mess... to the point of demonstrating we've reduced ordination to the point of absurdity.

"Commissioned" is essentially synonymous with "ordained." A commission, as in the military, is the conferring of a rank and job on a person, its Latin root *committere*, means "to entrust." "Lay Pastor" is itself a historical contradiction of terms. Pastors are ordained. Laity are by definition everyone who is not a pastor.

But the reason we have CLP's is that we have churches that are financially unable to support a full-time pastor who herself was able to pay for a graduate level education. CLP's exist because of financial inequalities, not because it is a theologically motivated concept. It is an example of the church working backwards—seeing a pragmatic necessity and inventing a theological category to fit.

Of all people, the professional leaders of churches should demonstrate what serving God, and not money, means. They, of all people, should hold at least some property in common enough to support one another in their ministry, provided the ministry is indeed valid. The ability of a local church to finance its professional leader should not dictate the quality of training or education of their leadership. This is a form of elitism. The quality of the ministries and the

training of our leaders should not be tied to the ability of individuals to pay for their own training. The wealthy among our churches ought to be excited to pay for ministry to go to places where it is needed, and to finance it just as they would a missionary.

One option would be to pay members of the covenant order through a common fund to which all churches contribute. Churches with particularly expensive cost of living areas would then need to contribute extra to the pay of their employed leaders to offset this. This does not mean members of the covenant order are *entitled* to get paid out of a common pot. They may still be subject to performance reviews, as well as spiritual accountability. But they would also thereby be necessarily engaged in continuing discipleship, education, and professional formation.

What are now CLPs would then be transformed into a novitiate wherein novices are able to do some work normally restricted to full members of the covenant order, while discerning whether they wish to take lifelong vows. Their full education would then be enabled by the covenant order. This is not all that distinct from trade unions, but rooted in our Christian tradition of monastic orders. We might allow for certain churches be led by novices, for a limited period of time. But novices would be time-limited to that status and would have to choose a life devoted to serving the church or not. Ultimately, those who wish to devote their professional lives in service to the wider church could join this covenanted order and find therein a supportive and discipling family who raise up the gifted and send them where they are best fit, regardless of their ability to finance their own way.

Church Planting and Bivocational Ministry

This covenanted order would not necessarily limit the necessary activities of bivocational church planters or rural pastors who have other work. Rather, it could free them to engage in establishing business-as-mission ventures with some financial security and mutual support. They might still need to take financial risks, but would not be risking all. Local churches would also not be limited in their ability to plant churches based on having a surplus of funds, but could qualify in other ways to receive a church planter from the covenanted order.

Functional Diversity

What seems to be a unique contribution of Presbyterian polity to church history is its priority on equality of status while still holding different levels of accountability or responsibility based on training, career choices, and structures of accountability. The Covenant Order would not necessarily focus on equipping everyone for the exact same ministry. Rather, any who take the vows of the Covenant Order and are properly equipped, could be utilized for the church in ways fitting their gifting and training.

There are a variety of functions that such people can and should play in the life of the church. Teachers should teach, and the church should employ professional teachers who are subject to high levels of covenant accountability. Administrators should administer, and if they do this as a career in the church, they should be subject to very similar expectations of accountability as teachers. Administrators should also be trained to a similar level as other functionaries. Rather than "executive pastors" we could simply empower people to be administrators (perhaps as deacons). We should find places for people to serve that do not

introduce the confusion of their acting according to a standardized role of pastoral care. If larger churches wish to employ a visionary and masterful public speaker who can pastor the pastors, we might as well reintroduce some historical notion of bishops, a role they are already functionally playing.

That said, the calling of the gospel is not to specialist positions, but to make disciples of Jesus. Again, there is no single location in the NT where a person is said to be called by God to an institutional role. "Calling" is nearly always universal and general to the gospel and not to particular jobs in particular places.⁶⁶ We've seen that Paul saw himself acting in many roles or performing many functions: apostle, teacher, evangelist, servant, and more. If we are going to be an institutional church, we should organize the institutional roles to affirm the gifts of people, while also equipping all people to grow in their discipleship and disciple-making abilities.

We need to identify what our purpose is, what kind of functions are needed to make this purpose happen, and what kind of roles best embody these functions.

⁶⁶ While Paul talks about being led by the Spirit to go or not go to certain places, we should not universalize his experience as normative. He himself talks about his own experiences as extraordinary, as when he talks about being drawn up into the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2.

Top Ten Things We Wish You Knew about The Church

Members of the STC (2021) asked each other, "What are some of the most common misunderstandings of the church you see that you'd like corrected?" Some offered these responses, many of which are held in common.

Dr. Amy J. Erickson

1. The Church is not a Music Concert.
2. The Church is not a Movie Theater.
I attended a service a few years ago (Baptist, not ECO). Architecturally, I felt like I had walked into a large movie theater. Then a notification on the main screen flashed the message: "please silence your cell phones and enjoy the service." Even if ECO churches aren't this overt, they also aren't immune from designing services that seem built on the assumption that entertainment is the main goal.
3. The Church is Christ's body, not his corporation.
4. The Church is not a worship service, worship event, or worship experience. The Church is a guest to Israel's story.
5. The Church is not a social service.
We often assume that the poor are outside of our church body and that our care for them needs to be mediated through parachurches or other ministries that we create, rather than that the church is the site where rich and poor come together to share their common need for Christ.
6. Jesus said the church is present where 2 or 3 are gathered—not 2,000 or 3,000.
7. The Church can't be opened or closed—it has the power of the keys.¹
8. The Church is in the wedding industry. Not the one you're thinking.
The church's mission is to hand out wedding invitations to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb and his Bride at the end of time, and to savor a foretaste of this feast in her communion gatherings.
9. The Church is going to hurt you. True love always does.
10. The Church isn't supposed to flourish. It's supposed to be faithful. Faithfulness looks like the suffering of the cross.²

Rev. Emily Hamilton

1. The Church is not called to be "the hands and feet of Jesus."
"Incarnational" ministry is an inadequate metaphor for understanding the presence of the Church in the world. We need to relate to Christ ascended in this age and the role and work of the Holy Spirit.
2. The Church is not an event/worship experience/concert/program.
3. The Church is supposed to be political. It is an alternative sociology/body-politic.

¹ Matthew 18.

² Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23, 14:27; Philippians 3:7–11; Colossian 1:24; 2 Timothy 1:8, 2:3; etc.

4. The Church's worship cannot be fully simulated in a digital environment.
5. The mission of the Church is not "fueled" by money/resources.
6. Church membership is not like a country club, gym, sorority.
7. The Church does not need to be "relevant" in order to "reach people."

Rev. Dr. Eric O. Jacobsen

1. We don't just go to church, we are the Church.
2. The Church is just as much the church when it is scattered.
3. The Church doesn't have a mission, the church is a mission.
4. The Church isn't singing for you.
5. The Church is more like a hospital than a country club.
6. Church leaders shouldn't be satisfied until it's members aren't satisfied.
7. Yes, other members of the church are supposed to irritate you.
8. When we insult the Church, we are insulting the bride of Christ.
9. The Church is not a tool for my personal spiritual development.
10. The Church is inescapably a part of the surrounding culture.

Rev. Dr. Mark Patterson

1. The church belongs to Jesus.
It does not belong to the session, the members, the pastor(s) or the presbytery. It belongs to Jesus alone to rule and lead it as he wills.
2. The Church is about Jesus.
It exists to make known, in word and deed, who he is, what he has done, and why he matters. It exists to reveal, in some small but real way, the reality of his kingdom, his love, and his grace.
3. The life, worship, and every ministry is to be shaped, not around personal preferences or what is popular or expedient but around the singular goal of honoring Christ Jesus, submitting to his will, and making him known.
4. *While centered upon person and work of Jesus, the church is in the business of people.*
Thus, the church continuously seeks them, loves them, protects them, teaches them, and strives in every way to grow them all in spiritual maturity.
5. Each person in worship, youth groups, small groups, potlucks, and every other form of the church gathering is loved by God, deeply, perfectly, totally, unconditionally, eternally, and permanently.
6. There is no sin or failure that the grace, mercy, and love of Jesus can't redeem and heal. There is no life he cannot transform and make new.
7. Some people in the church are very broken and hard to love all of the time. All people in the church are very broken and hard to love some of the time. There are no exemptions to this rule except that change which comes as the work and image of Jesus expands to shape ever more one's life.

8. The health of the church is not determined by money in the bank, people in the pews, or number of programs it provides but by the spiritual health and maturity of those within its fellowship whose love for God leads them to give themselves in pursuit of the glory of Christ and the building of his body.
9. Each person is expected—as well as helped and encouraged—to be a disciple of Jesus growing ever deeper in faith, understanding, love, service, and worship and living as an active participant in living and building these across the church.
10. Each person is expected—as well as helped and encouraged—to help others grow in faith and spiritual maturity, and actively contribute to the life, service, mission, and worship, a priesthood of all believers building the body in deeper discipleship and bringing outsiders into its fellowship.

Rev. Dr. Laura Smit

1. The Church does not exist in order to support the nuclear family.
The family should be enfolded in the more lasting and significant community of the Church.
2. Similarly, the Church does not exist in order to support any particular nation.
Our natural loyalty to our particular country, just like our natural loyalty to our particular family, must be subordinated to our membership in the great community of the Church, stretching back through time and stretching around the world.
3. Worship is an offering to God.
But we're tempted to believe that it's a therapeutic experience that helps recovery from a hard week.
4. A worship service isn't a concert.
C. S. Lewis was right in saying that one of the functions of church music is to give everyone an opportunity to be humble, to surrender our own preferences, and to give way to others. Neither my taste nor your taste in music is really relevant to the question of what music we should use in worship. For one thing, the words matter more than the tune, and a great tune does not save a text that's theologically misleading.
5. What we sing is part of the teaching ministry of the Church.
6. Church is about the people of God. It's not about meeting individual needs.
Church should be uncomfortable some of the time. Teaching should be at different levels. Sermons should vary in what concerns are addressed. Some of the prayers should be about needs not everyone was already aware of. If everything in a congregation is comfortable, then the congregation is probably too homogenous.
7. Jesus really is present in the sacrament of communion.
It is not only Roman Catholics who believe this. This is our theology as Presbyterians. Churches should be having communion as often as they can manage.³
8. Worship really is the purpose of the Church.
Of course we should be missional, but the goal of mission (because the goal of all of life) is

³ For more on this topic see *The Lord's Supper: Theology and Resources* (ECO, 2021).

to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. In the New Jerusalem, we won't be doing evangelism; we will still be learning more and more about God's never-ending nature, and we will still be giving God our adoration and praise. And we'll still be doing these things as an ever-more-loving community, as Church, not as individuals.

9. Church is not about a building.

Buildings can make churches enslaved to real estate, a mortgage, and maintenance. The Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head and yet he did really effective ministry.

10. The Church in the world today is not centered in the United States, nor in Europe, but in what we call "the two-thirds world" or "the majority world."

As far as the Church is concerned, the US is part of the minority world, the increasingly unchurched world, the mission field that attracts missionaries from lots of countries. We are not the center; we are not in charge; we are not the dominant voice in the global Church.

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

See my chapter in this book called "5 Misunderstandings of the Church" for details about the building/space, the event/time, the people/congregation, the institution/corporation, and experience. My chapter in this book called "What and Where is the Church in Society" offers another vital point: the church must become a primary community again. As the editor, I'm going to take liberties and offer 11 additional ones here:

1. There is no gospel in the New Testament that does not include the Church.

The good news is the arrived and coming kingdom of God, the benefits received from that are secondary.

2. The Church exists as God-for-creation.

The Church's mission is to all creation, not to humans alone, and not to individual humans alone. God in Christ is reconciling all things, all creation to himself,⁴ not snatching people out of his creation. Churches that exist at the cost of damaging God's creation fail to properly represent his mission.⁵ Churches that ignore creation, or seek escape from it are not fully revealing the kingdom of God.

3. The Church is not a corporation.

Corporations exist to reduce accountability to increase power... Jesus took on the sins of the world by giving up his power.⁶ We should have the mind of Christ who maximized responsibility while reducing his power.

4. Worship is the goal, not the gateway.

I once visited a Hindu temple and I imagine my experience there was similar to non-Christians with no background entering our worship events. Church should never be reduced to a single event designed for all people. Worship-centrality is a Christendom imposition on Christianity.

⁴ Colossians 1:20.

⁵ See my book *Plundering Eden: A Subversive Theology of Creation and Ecology* (Cascade, 2020).

⁶ Philippians 2.

5. The Church does not replace Israel.
Gentiles (non Jews of all ethnicities) are grafted into the people of God.⁷ There is one people of God into which we are included by Jesus as "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ. This is a "mystery."⁸ But this doesn't make Gentiles into Jews.
6. Churches are not united by nor are Christians saved by faith statements. We are united by Christ and saved by Christ alone.
7. Church does not build or expand the kingdom of God. The church reveals the kingdom of God.⁹
8. The Church does not exist for the common good, flourishing, or justice of any society.
Any version of the common good, flourishing, or justice that is not dependent on Jesus being the king is a subversion of Jesus' gospel. Jesus is the gospel, not commonwealth, flourishing, or justice. Jesus brings his own version of these.
9. Healthy churches do not necessarily grow.
Institutional or corporate health as measured by growth is nothing more than meeting market demand with a product of service that is either in demand, or for which a demand can be created. Meeting market demands creates and reinforces consumer understandings of what church is and is for. Weeds often grow best, but the most valuable plants often take careful and hard work to see them flourish and bear fruit in harsh environments. The pastor's job is not to grow the church, but to feed it, guide it, lead it, and to fertilize the soil so that it reveals the kingdom of God to its context, even if as a bonsai tree.
Church institutions should be right-sized according to group dynamics, the mission it is pursuing. No pastor can care for members of a flock which is larger than he or she can know.
10. The Church does not need money (property, material wealth), and God never asks for money in the Bible, nor claims it belongs to him. Money did not exist in the OT and God did not create it, it has a logic all its own as a principality and power.¹⁰
11. The life of the Church and the people of God is a journey, not a static state of being.
We must join the people of God in exodus from slavery to the powers of the world, in formation in the wilderness, in life together in the promised land (now and not yet), and mission to the world. Churches that exist in a state of being are Christendom structures that will pass away.

⁷ See Romans 11.

⁸ Ephesians 3:6.

⁹ See my chapter on "The Church's Being and Mission" in this book.

¹⁰ See my book *Plundering Egypt: A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy* (Cascade, 2016) for a detailed argument on this.