The Princeton Theological Review

THE CHURCH THROUGH MANY EYES

Perspectives on Ecclesiology

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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONVERSATION

The current situation in the churches is one of ecclesial strife. We seem to be arguing over many, admittedly important, issues with differing degrees of success. Through all this I often wonder, and I doubt I am alone, what exactly is it we are striving for in our ecclesial dialogues?

In his 1912-13 lectures on dogmatics, Ernst Troeltsch argued that in modern thought "[t]he concept of Church has been replaced by the concept of the common Christian spirit as a religious living unity, or the developing Kingdom of God." What Troeltsch was getting at was that the community of believers was finally being thought of not as a human institution of practices and dogmas, but as the Kingdom of God itself. It is through this very community, which God has called into being in this world, that love, peace, and justice would come to rule the Earth.

It is this sort of vision of the Church that motivates much of the criticism of the mainline churches, criticism that is apparently justified by their current state of decline. The mainline churches are often seen as sideline or old school, and they are often charged as no longer serving the mission of the Kingdom of God in our society. This charge is aptly demonstrated to be misguided by Professor James Moorhead in his article, "Is Mainstream Protestantism in Decline?"

Professor Moorhead points out that the current "declension thesis," so popular amongst the mainline's critics, is one that lacks historical validity. By briefly relating the history of the mainline churches in this country, Moorhead draws attention to the fact that they have never enjoyed unparalleled success; there never was a golden period from which they might fall. Rather, the mainline churches have been, are, and should be dynamic institutions that repeatedly refocus themselves to address surrounding culture. The mainline is not above critique by any means, and without hesitation Moorhead rightly points out some of its historical failures. But he also shows that the mainline contains much that the Church would do well to consider as it looks forward. He writes, "At its highest, the mainstream's centrism and its ecumenism are motivated by a vision of people composing their differences in order to manifest the unity of the body of Christ and working creatively and humbly to demonstrate God's love for the entire world." Such churches are by no means static institutions concerned merely with their own preservation; instead, they are faithfully bearing witness to the received message of the gospel in an ever-changing culture.

John Drury's article, "The Sending of the Church: Toward an Emergent Ecclesiology," is a welcome one. In it, he appreciatively and critically engages with the new "emergent church" movement. Drury leads us through the principles of emergent thought, touching on epistemology, cultural analysis, and finally ecclesiology, where he makes a constructive proposal. Here the focus is on a "missional" understanding of the being of God, in which the emphasis is shifted from the Church itself to the being and act of God who is truly the one at work both inside and outside of the walls of the Church. The Church in such a proposal is not the sole place where Christ works in the world. Instead, the Church is one of the instruments of God in Christ's mission in the world. In other words, the Church participates, and is taken up into, God's work for the coming kingdom; it is not the institution where God's kingdom is present.

In "Cult(ure) of Greed," Carla Rodriguez points out the problems of the "Prosperity Gospel" through a highly original method. Making use of the apocalyptic imagery found in the book of Revelation, she points out the idolatrous compromises made by those who proclaim the Prosperity Gospel. In such proclamation, Jesus becomes a "means to an end, the end being a prosperous life." The Gospel thereby becomes the message of a "God" who is subject to our wants and desires of economic fulfillment, instead of the God who came in Jesus Christ to liberate us from the tyranny of sin and death. It is to the latter message that Rodriguez calls the Church to bear witness in its preaching and practice.

In our reflections, Shelli Poe-Messner reminds us of the great power the Church exercises over its members in the sacrament of baptism, urging critical consideration of how that power is exercised. Travis McMaken calls us to remember that we are participants in the body of Christ not primarily so that our own needs might be met, but in order to fulfill our purpose to give glory to God through our proclamation of Jesus Christ. The other reflections and book reviews

further focus our attention on the recognition of the distinction between God and the Church.

All of the articles, reflections, and book reviews contained herein correspond with Karl Barth's statement, "We know the Church only in its unlikeness to the Kingdom of God." The Church is a human institution comprised of women and men who gather to worship, bear witness to God as known in Jesus Christ, and urgently await the coming of God's Kingdom. As such an unmistakably human institution, the Church will always be a place of both joy and disappointment. As a body of believers, we should never cease striving to be more like the Kingdom of God; hopefully this issue of the PTR will serve as an aid in that direction. But we must recognize that the Kingdom of God will come into being only through God's act. Participants in today's ecclesiological situation would do well to heed this insight and to realize that the Church is not synonymous with the Kingdom of God. Rather it is the community of believers that continually cries aloud to our Lord, "Thy Kingdom Come!"

MATTHEW J. BRUCE
BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

IS MAINSTREAM PROTESTANTISM IN DECLINE?
by James H. Moorhead

For several decades, it has been fashionable to tell the story of mainstream American Protestantism as a tale that goes something like this: Once near the center of American life, the churches of the Protestant mainstream have, since the 1960s, lost members, money, and the capacity to mold culture and society. Thus what was once mainline now seems old-line or sideline. Usually to highlight the decline of the mainstream, scholars point to the surge of conservative Protestant groups, whether described as fundamentalist or evangelical, and show how they, unlike the mainstream, are growing in numbers and influence.

This story provides a well-turned plot, but does it adequately describe the realities of mainstream Protestantism over the past forty or so years? From one perspective, the answer is certainly yes. Mainstream churches have lost members, contributions to denominational budgets have diminished forcing staff and program cuts, and mainstream religious leaders generally do not have the public visibility of their more conservative counterparts. News stories, for example, sometimes imply by what they choose to cover and by whom they interview that mainstream Protestantism is peripheral. For instance, some weeks ago on CNN Wolf Blitzer ran a story about speculation that recent natural disasters, from Hurricane Katrina to the tsunami in Southeast Asia and the earthquakes in Pakistan, were signs of the end of the world. As his religious authority, Blitzer interviewed the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Where was a mainstream perspective on the issue? From Blitzer's report, one would not have had a clue that such a thing existed.

Yet it is profoundly misleading to suggest that the history of mainstream Protestantism is entirely an account of waning influence, decreasing membership, and shrinking budgets. The declension thesis, while illuminating important and undeniable aspects of the story, can lead to serious misunderstandings. First, it often distorts the past by implying that the major Protestant churches enjoyed an undifferentiated golden age until, at a point usually placed in the turbulent 1960s, the mainstream fell from glory. In point of fact, mainstream Protestantism has seldom enjoyed uncontested success. It has from the beginning experienced significant failures as well as victories, and it has often divided against itself. It has not ever been a static entity, for it has had to redefine and reinvent itself on more than one occasion. Second, if the declension thesis is selective in reading the past, it is equally so in its approach to the present, and usually ignores signs of vitality in the allegedly declining churches.

I

The place to begin is with the most basic of questions: What does "mainstream Protestantism" mean? The term itself, along with the alternate "mainline Protestantism," did not come into widespread use until the 1950s and '60s. Another phrase that arose during that period and has been used since is "Protestant establishment." Although these terms have different etymologies and connotations, most scholars have used them to point to those Protestant denominations that historically exercised, or at least were perceived to exercise, a central influence upon religious life as well as upon American culture and ethos. By virtue of their history, their numbers, or their place in society, these churches claimed to hold a special moral proprietorship over the nation. In the twentieth century with the ecumenical movement in full stride, mainstream churches were those, according to most interpreters, who played important roles as supporters and leaders of organizations such as the Federal (later National) Council of Churches and the World Council. If one uses the foregoing as defining traits, it is clear that the mainstream has not been static and there has been considerable murkiness as to where its boundaries should be drawn. A quick overview of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries makes the point.[1]

Near the beginning of the republic in the 1790s, three denominations would have been candidates for mainline status: the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians, and the Presbyterians. Non-Protestant groups scarcely registered numerically, with Catholics accounting for about one percent of the population and Jews even less in the first federal census. A few other Protestant groups had respectable numbers, but, unlike the three largest groups, lacked the stature, the opportunity, or, in some cases, the will to be considered mainstream. Congregationalists, however, had enjoyed legal establishment in several New England states and continued to do so in Connecticut until 1817 and in Massachusetts until 1833. Episcopalians held similar privileges at one time or another in the South as well as in Maryland and New

York. Although Presbyterians had never possessed these legal advantages, they did have considerable strength in the middle and southern states where their growing numbers, their social prestige, and their connection with significant educational ventures, such as the College of New Jersey (Princeton), made them a formidable religious presence

In the early nineteenth century, American Protestantism rapidly diversified. Baptists and Methodists both grew dramatically, far outpacing the rate of increase among the older denominations. In 1790, Methodism had been a small blip on the radar screen of American religion; by mid-nineteenth century; it was the largest Protestant group, followed by Baptist bodies in second place.

The change within Protestantism involved more than a shift of numerical strength among various denominations. As Nathan Hatch has argued, the early 1800's witnessed "the democratization of American Christianity." In many aspects of society and culture, the slogans of liberty and democracy from the Revolutionary Era took on a meaning more radical than the generation of '76 could ever have imagined. Christianity was not immune to this spirit, and a new kind of leader came to the fore. Often lacking formal education and contemptuous of both creeds and learned ministers, that leader mobilized popular support by encouraging others to thumb their noses at

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ancient authority, to think for themselves, and to examine the Scriptures directly. The new leader's power came from an ability to identify with the common people and to speak directly to their concerns. Thus, argues Hatch, groups such as the "Christian" movement (sometimes called the Restoration Movement or the Campbellites after one of their leaders), the early Methodists, the Baptists, the Mormons, and the black churches were actually the trend setters for antebellum religion. Even when they won only a handful of followers—and, of course, in some cases, they won far more—they were defining

the new democratic ethos with which older Protestant churches had to come to terms. The success of the newcomers would appear to suggest, returning to the central image of this article, that the mainstream had become an estuary where currents collided and none was dominant. Or as Hatch expresses the matter using a different metaphor, the new movements "did not lash out at some combination of Protestant churches...that had gained hegemony over the nation's spiritual destiny. Their passion grew out of the perception that there was no authoritative center."[2]

Yet the United States was not completely without a religious center. Certain denominations claimed a degree of preeminence by virtue of their access to the levers of cultural influence, and among these instruments were institutions of higher education. Before the Civil War over five hundred colleges or institutes were founded. The vast majority were church affiliated, Presbyterians and Congregationalists being the chief sponsors at the beginning of the 1800's. In these schools, religious influences were quite palpable. Chapel was usually required, Protestant assumptions suffused the curriculum, and the whole process was overseen by administrators and faculty drawn heavily from the ranks of the clergy. Thus the lawyers, statesmen, merchants, and other secular leaders trained in these schools encountered a Protestant worldview shaped for the most part by a few leading denominations. These older churches continued to have sources of influence transcending mere numbers and advantages that the democratization of American Christianity had not erased. They had, in short, an aura of respectability that the upstart religious bodies had to struggle to attain. By the 1840's and 1850's, however, many of those popular groups were well on the way to doing so. Baptists and Methodists, for example, were founding their own colleges, establishing learned theological journals, and building more genteel houses of worship.[3]

These changes underscore the complex ways in which Protestant identity was redefined in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the older churches that had been so successful in the colonial era and were attuned to hierarchical and less democratic impulses had to give ground to the populist sentiments surging across the land. They might still wish to tame the rabble, but now had to do so using popular instruments: they created voluntary associations to promote benevolent causes, they organized revivals—witness Presbyterian Charles G. Finney's "new measures" self-consciously borrowed from the Methodists—in a more crassly manipulative style than ever before, and they sought to mobilize

opinion via the new mass medium of the penny press. On the other hand, the newer "popular" denominations often felt what Nathan Hatch calls "the allure of respectability." They sought to exhibit a more tasteful or refined Christianity and, in the process, found themselves imitating the practices of older, more culturally established churches that once they would have scorned.[4]

Yet these changes did not mean that Protestant groups were melting into a bland sameness. Well into the nineteenth century, theological battles among denominations often assumed a ferocity that we can scarcely imagine. For example, Baptists and Methodists hammered each other over infant baptism and various groups ganged up on Presbyterians to mock the alleged absurdities of Calvinism. To the extent that major Protestant bodies forged unity, it manifested itself chiefly in broad generalizations or in opposition to some alien "other," such as the 1790's infidelity of radical groups of Enlightened thinkers, the early 1800's barbarism and bowie knife style of civilization associated with westward expansion, or by mid-century, the Mormon menace, and at all seasons, that most inveterate of Protestant foes, Roman Catholicism, against which diverse Protestants could form a common front. Roman Catholicism acquired renewed utility as a Protestant rallying point while immigrants dramatically raised the numbers of adherents for that faith throughout the nineteenth century.

But how much power or influence did the major Protestant groups actually exercise in American life? The answer is mixed, varying from issue to issue, place to place, and decade to decade. For example, in the public schools a Protestant vision of the world largely triumphed. Textbooks limned "the United States...[as] a Protestant nation with a divinely appointed mission," and often extolled Puritan settlers of New England as the models of that holy errand while non-Protestant ethnic groups and nations generally received a much less favorable portrayal. To the extent that the Bible was read in the public schools, the version employed almost without exception was the authorized King James Version, certainly not the Catholic Douai version. Because of such restrictions, Roman Catholics often insisted that the public schools were biased against them and demanded redress by way of removing offensive materials from curricula or of providing public moneys for their private schools, though they usually had little success.

In another area, Protestants enjoyed widespread, though not universal triumph. In securing legal

enforcement of the Sabbath, and by Sabbath, the vast majority meant Sunday rather than Saturday, they persuaded most states to maintain blue laws throughout the nineteenth century and often well into the twentieth. But when activists attempted to stop the Sunday mails in a vigorous campaign in the 1820s,

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they met a cold rebuff from Congress. Of course, Protestants' triumphs were especially tenuous in large urban areas. There, in face of the poverty of the underclass and among an increasingly non-Protestant populace augmented by immigration, the dream of establishing moral order through Sunday schools, the YMCA, and kindred organizations proved inadequate as the nineteenth century wore on. But undoubtedly the greatest social failure of the Protestant churches was their inability to form a consensus that could cope with slavery and sectional discord. Instead of helping the nation to resolve these issues, the churches reflected them in their own lives. For example, both Methodists and Baptists broke in the 1840s along North-South lines over the peculiar institution. Although Presbyterians kept a portion of their fellowship (the Old School) together longer, the passions of the Civil War also divided them into Northern and Southern wings in 1861.[5]

The years following the Civil War marked the high tide of what Sydney Ahlstrom has called "crusading Protestantism." With the Congregationalists' creation of the Woman's Board of Missions in 1868, and that of similar women's organizations in other denominations soon after, support for the foreign missions movement began to increase dramatically. The Student Volunteer Movement, founded in 1888, stirred American campuses with its watchword: "the evangelization of the world in this generation." Statistics testify to a surge of commitment to the cause: in the thirty-five years after 1880, the number of American missionaries abroad increased nearly tenfold. Many Protestants understood these exertions of Protestant influence

abroad to be related to its preservation at home. "On its religious life," one Methodist observed in 1889, "rests all the good there is in the nation. To successfully maintain it among ourselves we must labor to diffuse it to others." To conform American life at home to their moral vision, many Protestants, through organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (1874) and the Anti-Saloon League (1895), sought to dry up every drop of alcohol in the land. The great victory of the temperance movement came with the passage and ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution during the months between December 1917 and January 1919, but the enactment of prohibition was only the most famous instance of successful lobbying by self-professed Christian interests in the post-Civil

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War era. In the decades after Appomattox, these groups played a role in the enactment of federal legislation regulating obscenity, cracking down on the Mormon practice of polygamy, and ending the sale of narcotics. Moreover, in the 1880s and '90s a number of Protestant leaders, surveying the dislocations and inequities wrought by industrial capitalism, began calling for a more just social and economic order. Although very few of these people were socialists, they did demand a transformation of national attitudes and policies to mitigate the harshness of a laissez-faire economy and to promote greater equity and cooperation among social classes. Many of them also fervently encouraged the use of the social sciences, such as economics and sociology, to help construct a more just social order. Their movement, advocating what was initially called social Christianity and later became known as the Social Gospel, reached its apogee by the first decade of the twentieth century.

At the same time, Protestants took a major step toward unity. In 1908, thirty-three Protestant denominations formed the Federal Council of Churches. Though restricted to Trinitarian churches, the FCC was more a task-oriented than creedal organization. It sought "to bring the Christian bodies of America into united service," and the emphases of the Social Gospel became an important part of that service. A new emphasis upon efficiency permeated the Federal Council, much of the Social Gospel, and the national life of the major denominations. To Christianize America more thoroughly and to coordinate the growing bureaucracies that ran their programs, Protestants believed that the adoption of models of business management and efficiency would enable them to coordinate their operations and thereby impress Protestant values upon the nation. As one Presbyterian committee said of a denominational fundraising effort: "Out of such a co-operative Movement it is believed that there may be placed upon the nation and the world the impact of a united Protestantism."[6]

At first glance, such rhetoric and activism would appear to confirm the enduring influence of the major Protestant churches, which was now considerably broader than the 1790s trio of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists. Yet once again the reality of mainstream dominance was in important ways in doubt. Ecumenical activism reflected in part the fear that Protestantism, faced with the increasingly Catholic, Jewish, or secular immigration, was in danger of losing its majority, or at least its capacity to control American life. Thus in 1908, the same year that the Federal Council of Churches was created, the Congregational minister Newman Smyth argued that Protestantism "has frayed out into so many separate strands. No single thread of it is strong enough to move the whole social mechanism; it is like so many ravelings; at most one strand may move a few wheels." Even the FCC was not as strong as much of its rhetoric would suggest. At the organizing meeting, the council's first president declared, "It is the voice of many millions that speaks here to-day like the voice of many waters." In reality, the Federal Council was doing nothing of the sort. In its first years, member denominations often paid little attention to it, and it struggled both to raise and to function within its minuscule budget. Moreover, the growing strains between liberal and conservative Protestants, which erupted in the 1920s in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, further limited the major churches from speaking with one voice.[7]

According to most accounts, by the end of the 1920s the Protestant mainstream was either facing or would soon face a moment of historical reckoning. Robert Handy has argued that Protestants were experiencing "a second disestablishment" by the time the Great Depression began. Their power to mold American society and culture was waning just as their official state support and tax dollars had been stripped away in the late colonial or early national period. Sydney Ahlstrom contended that the crisis came a bit later when the events of the 1960s ended the era of Protestant hegemony in American life. Yet as the foregoing paragraphs have tried to suggest, Protestant dominance had never been fully secure or uncontested, the Protestant mainstream had had to reinvent itself in order to survive, and it was sometimes unable to attain moral and theological consensus on important questions. Although accounts of recent mainstream decline may be accurate, what preceded declension was not the Garden of Eden.[8]

II

What, then, *has* changed for mainstream Protestantism in recent decades? What, that is, other than the obvious fact that many of the churches so designated have lost members and money?

A fact seldom noted but of immense significance is that Roman Catholicism has largely ceased to function as a bogey against which mainstream Protestantism can rally. By the mid-twentieth century, most culturally respectable Protestants had long since abandoned the uglier forms of name-calling against Catholics, but a residual suspicion still served as a point of Protestant unity. For example, the National Council of Churches (the successor to the Federal Council) had barely come into existence in 1950 when President Truman's plan to name an ambassador to the Vatican prompted the new organization to damn the idea as a dangerous violation of the separation of church and state. Yet within a few years, Catholicism as a negative reference point had largely vanished. Although John F. Kennedy's campaign for the presidency in 1960 temporarily stoked many traditional fears, his conduct in office largely dissipated anti-Catholic anxieties. At the same time, the papacy of John XXIII (1958-63) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) changed both the Catholic Church and Protestants' perception of it. The warm humanity of Pope John made the church seem less authoritarian and alien to outsiders while the pronouncements of the Council held out an ecumenical olive branch to Protestants, and it also appeared to reconcile Roman Catholicism to the separation of church and state and to democracy. In

short, the Catholic Church no longer seemed "un-American" to many Protestants. Moreover, the changing character of the Catholics in the pew confirmed the same point. The church's ranks swelled steadily by the foreign born throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, until Congress passed immigration restriction legislation in the 1920s. But by the 1950s, Catholicism had lost much of the character of an immigrant church and thus again seemed less alien and more "American" to outsiders.[9]

As Catholicism was ceasing to offer a common foe, disunity in the Protestant house would soon reappear. The fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s resulted in a loss for fundamentalists.

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Their drive to take over the national machinery of two denominations (the major northern branches of the Baptist and Presbyterian churches) had failed, and their push to eliminate the teaching of evolution from the public schools resulted in a public relations debacle in the Scopes trial of 1925. While some of these ultraconservatives withdrew to form separate denominations, most stayed within their respective denominations. Either way, they cultivated their own gardens and largely avoided further battles. By the 1940s, they, or more often, their spiritual descendants, were reemerging in the public square via organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals or the ministry of figures such as Billy Graham. Since this younger generation had largely foresworn what they perceived as the unduly confrontational and abrasive stance of their fathers and mothers in the faith, their arguments with the leaders of mainstream Protestantism were initially muted.[10]

In the 1960s and 1970s, that relative peace began ebbing away. Within major Protestant bodies, self-styled conservative evangelical movements opposed what they perceived as the left-ward drift of their denominational leadership, an alleged spiritual

defection identified at times with a liberalizing theology and at other times with the advocacy of liberal social causes. The formation of the Presbyterian Lay Committee to fight the adoption of the Confession of 1967, now part of the church's *Book of Confessions*, is a prime demonstration of the phenomenon. While these struggles took place *within* mainstream churches, a similar reaction was occurring

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in the larger society. To resist what they perceived as the nation's decline into godlessness and immorality, various Christian conservative groups mobilized to fight Supreme Court decisions that had banned state-sponsored prayer and Bible reading in public schools and had made abortion a legal right. While the groups involved in denominational conflicts and political conflicts were not, of course, identical, in some instances they did overlap. Perhaps what they had most in common was that each reflected a growing culture of polarization. One mark of the extent to which this polarization had rearranged old lines of division was the fact that on selected issues, such as abortion, politically conservative activist Christians tried to create a unified voice with their erstwhile enemy, Roman Catholicism.[11]

Superficial judgment might suggest that polarization has lessened in the years since protesters took to the streets in the 1960s, but in fact, schisms may actually have deepened. Despite the passions aroused by civil rights demonstrations and anti-war marches, these causes, particularly when one adds in the factor of whether one was theologically liberal or conservative, did not neatly divide church people into two permanently opposed camps. Yet in recent years, differences over issues such as feminism, homosexuality, abortion, and liberal versus conservative theology have tended, in the language of the sociologists, to "stack" on top of one another and thus reinforce enduring coalitions and divisions. In this respect, religious life parallels the deepening division between the two major political parties. In

the mid-twentieth century, greater diversity existed within each party. While Democrats were generally more liberal and Republicans more conservative (according to the common slippery definitions of those words), Democrats nevertheless had a significant contingent of conservatives in their ranks just as Republicans counted liberals and moderates among their number. Today the old-line conservative Democrat like Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina and the liberal Republican in the mold of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller are vanishing breeds.[12]

The culture of polarization is inimical to the mainstream because the latter tends to be centrist. Writing of mainstream Protestantism in the first half of the twentieth-century, William Hutchison objected to the use of the term "liberal Protestantism" to denote those churches. "The Protestant establishment," Hutchison avers, "can in fact be understood as a 'broad church' that held together, and exercised whatever cultural authority it did enjoy, precisely because it retained the adherence, at all levels, of many besides liberals."[13] While the leadership of the mainstream may be more "liberal" now than for the period Hutchison described, his basic point is still valid. Mainstream churches continue to have considerable theological and political diversity within themselves, and ever since those bodies pioneered the way in ecumenical endeavor, they have sought ways to compose differences so as to include as many people as possible. Of course, in an era of polarization, the centrist position can become harder to sustain and sometimes may resemble a no-man's land.

III

The contemporary mainstream is, however, more than a no-man's land. If readers of this essay are still inclined to interpret the history of mainstream Protestantism during the last forty or so years solely as declension from a golden age that was lost around the time Eisenhower left the White House, they might again ponder the massive upheavals that forced a redefinition of Protestant identity in the nineteenth century. They might also look at the provocative essays collected by Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans under the title *The Quiet Hand of God*.[14] As an account of the contemporary mainstream, the book argues that mainstream churches do not seek a noisy or confrontational style of influence. "For mainliners," Wuthnow notes, Christian influence "does not mean proclaiming themselves to be the exclusive mouthpieces of God or selectively citing Bible verses to show why one manifestation of evil is so much worse than others. It means tapping into the deeper

truths about love, redemption, reconciliation and justice that are recurrent themes in biblical tradition."[15]

This witness, the various essayists document, is not insubstantial because it is often quiet. The denominations they identify as mainstream raised and spent in 1997 funds greater than the budget of the state of Colorado, and all of the money spent by political action committees during 1997-98 was only about two percent of what Americans were donating to mainstream churches. Moreover, the mainstream churches are deeply involved in various volunteer activities that serve their communities and often link church people to networks including "secular" service agencies, and this connection indirectly magnifies mainline influence. Additionally, there is in the mainstream a fairly substantial consensus that, whether through denominational offices in Washington, D.C. or through local soup kitchens, that Christians should advocate on behalf of the poor. This consensus lacks the drama–and hence the newsworthiness–of hotly disputed issues. Usually the news media deem a mainstream church meeting worthy of coverage only when there is an anticipated donnybrook over the ordination of gays and lesbians. When General Assemblies or General Conferences debate these matters, the television cameras run and the bright lights are turned on. When the conversation turns from sex to a topic such as church sponsored relief efforts, the lights are turned off and the television crews withdraw.

Yet even when mainstream bodies engage in conflict over homosexuality, the real story may not be the inability to resolve the issue. Perhaps the more substantial point, as Wendy Cadge argues in the Wuthnow-Evans volume, is in the churches' "continued commitment to be in dialogue and debate about the topic."[16] By providing one of the few spaces where the issue can be discussed with (at least on occasion) a measure of civility and openness, the mainstream churches are contributing in a significant way to public life. Thus a phenomenon that at one level represents a fraying of the centrist position of the mainstream is from another perspective a significant reaffirmation of that centrist inclusive view.

None of the above should be taken to suggest that the problems faced by the mainstream are unreal or that there are not spiritual and theological dangers in the path chosen by the mainstream churches. Wuthnow succinctly identifies one problem in his concluding essay: "Mainline members do not draw high walls between themselves and the rest of society, preferring instead to participate fully in the workplace, in higher education, in discussions of scientific and technological developments, and in the activities of community organizations." If this stance allows them to be quietly effective, it also poses the danger that, "unless mainline members and their leaders develop a clear oppositional stance toward certain aspects of the wider culture" they will be co-opted by it.[17]

But at its best the mainstream embodies something more than a sense of being at ease in Zion or a merely pragmatic desire to split all differences in search of elusive middle ground. At its highest, the mainstream's centrism and its ecumenism are motivated by a vision of people composing their differences in order to manifest the unity of the body of Christ and working creatively and humbly to demonstrate God's love for the entire world. That vision is best understood as a profoundly biblical one, not as spiritual myopia or declension.

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Notes

[1] For a discussion of the origin of this terminology, I am deeply indebted to Marianne Okkema Rhebergen, "'Mainstream' and 'Mainline': A Study in Emerging Terminology" (Ph.D. seminar paper, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994).

[2] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

[3] George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 80.

[4] Hatch, *Democratization*, 193–209. See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 313–52.

[5] Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), esp. 41–62; the quotation is from p. 62. Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 22–26; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Prelude to Abolitionism: Sabbatarian Politics and the Second Party System," *Journal of American History* 58 (Sept. 1971), 316–41; C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

[6] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 857–76; Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian*

Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); "First Annual Report of the Committee on the New Era Expansion Program," in *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; Part II: Reports of the Boards* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1919), 27.

[7] Newman Smyth, *Passing Protestantism and Coming Catholicism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 27–28. On the Federal Council, see the essay by Robert A. Schneider in William R. Hutchison, *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment, 1900–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95–121.

[8] Robert T. Handy, *A Christian American: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 159–84; Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 1079–96.

[9] Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from the Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 421–54.

[10] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[11] Mark Silk, *Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 158–81.

[12] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 224–25.

[13] Hutchison, *Between the Times*, 14.

[14] Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, eds., *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-based Activism and Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (London: University of California Press, 2002).

[15] Wuthnow and Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 21–22.

[16] Wuthnow and Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 266.

[17] Wuthnow and Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 401.

THE SENDING OF THE CHURCH:
Toward an Emergent Ecclesiology
by John Drury

The emergent conversation is a conversation about emerging *churches*. Until this emphasis on the church is acknowledged, the debate will remain a clanging cymbal. Emergent can be broadly categorized as a renewal movement. Hence the conversation is intended to support and reflect upon new things afoot in churches. Behind every pragmatic proposal for renewal lies a theological question: What is the church in today's world? This is the question many emergents are trying to answer. The following is my own contribution to this conversation.

What is Emergent?

Before making any constructive suggestions, it is helpful to clarify what is meant by the term "emergent." Even a quick glance at the relevant websites and literature shows that the definition of emergent is up for grabs.[1] What emergent really is or means is by definition an open question. As a matter of fact, defining emergent has become a bit of a cottage industry.[2] The emergent conversation calls for theology to be open source. In a sense, anyone who wants to be emergent is invited to the conversation. Although this slipperiness proves frustrating for some critics, it is also an opportunity for those with critical questions to engage the conversation from within. The inherent adaptability of emergent makes it difficult to criticize but easy to transform.

Within this adaptability, however, there is a definable story and shape to emergent. The larger story begins with the changing political, socio-economic, philosophical, and religious scene. However one names this new world, it is certainly emerging. It is new but not yet set in stone. We are in a transitional time. Although there is much debate about the details, most people would not quarrel with this cultural description. The uniqueness of emergent is its direct and intentional engagement with this cultural reality. The emergent question is not *whether* this new reality is good or *how* to preserve the church is the midst of it; rather, the question is what new thing is happening in churches in light of these changes.

One can see the emphasis on ecclesial newness in the following excerpt from "The Emergent Story":

> This complex and many-faceted transition calls for innovative Christian leaders from all streams of the Christian faith around the world to collaborate in unprecedented ways. We must imagine and pursue the development of new ways of being followers of Jesus… new ways of doing theology and living biblically, new understandings of mission, new ways of expressing compassion and seeking justice, new kinds of faith communities, new approaches to worship and service, new integrations and conversations and convergences and dreams.[3]

Clearly emergent is focused on ecclesial innovation rather than institutional preservation.

But this macro story should be supplemented by the concrete story of emergent's leaders. The point people in the emergent conversation are a strange concoction of disgruntled evangelical youth pastors and post-fundamentalist church planters with an English-teacher-turned-pastor as their senior statesman. The latter is Brian McLaren, whose *A New Kind of Christian* has become the manifesto for thousands of young pastors.[4] Approaching McLaren in publishing prominence are Tony Jones and Dan Kimball, both former youth pastors. Newer names on the scene are church planters Chris Seay and Doug Pagitt. Super-church pastor Rob Bell has also become a significant late-comer to the conversation. All of these figures can be categorized as *revisionist evangelicals*. Despite their newest wave of evangelical critics, emergents glean their concern for cultural relevance from their evangelical roots.[5] No matter how many changes are made, the evangelical factor remains at least a genetic part of the emergent story.

The rest of the story is of course still being written. Wherever it goes, enough time has passed for the conversation to take on a definite shape. It takes shape around a number of distinct concerns. All of these concerns are pragmatically oriented toward church renewal in the midst of the current cultural shift. These concerns can be parsed into three overlapping yet distinguishable categories.

Epistemology

Emergents have something to say about how we know. Although there are numerous variations, the common denominator of emergent epistemology is that of a critical distance from strong truth claims, and

hence an aversion to timeless propositions and a preference for contextual stories. Terms like "postmodern" or "postfoundationalist" or even "narrative" are used in this regard. This aspect obviously attracts the more philosophically oriented, yet it has practical thrust: one communicates the gospel quite differently if it is not a list of propositions to be accepted rationally but rather a story to be "lived into," so to speak.

Cultural Analysis

Emergents are also making observations about the contemporary culture in which we live. The claim is that we are in the process of a massive shift in cultural forms and norms resulting in a new emphasis on community, the rise of pop cultural literacy, and a

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changing role of the church in society. Terms like "globalism" or "pluralism" or even "tribalism" are used in conjunction with this aspect of the emergent conversation. Such cultural analysis naturally attracts the more pragmatically oriented as they seek to find new forms, styles, and methods to "fit" the current culture. Yet all emergents necessarily have some interest in cultural analysis, for the term "emergent" itself has this cultural valence. "Emergent" in the narrowest sense refers to emerging cultural phenomena: emerging cultures, emerging generations, emerging churches.

Ecclesiology

Emergents are furthermore saying something about the nature of the church. The dominant theme is that the church's nature subsists in its mission and that the structures and ministries of the church should reflect its missional nature. This implies both the addition of forgotten aspects of the church's mission in the world as well as the subtraction of those activities in the church that do not serve its mission. Emergents

thus speak of "missional" communities or "post-Christendom" models or even an "apostolic" ethos. Such ecclesiological discussions draw in the more theologically oriented, who are interested in scriptural exegesis, ecclesiological concepts, polity and denominational structures, the dialogue with missiology, and the understanding of ministry and laity. But of course, all emergents participate in such theological reflection, at least at the motivational level. For the church to be worth changing, it must be worth saving. Hence one can see here a genuine concern for the church and its future.

These three aspects are interrelated and inseparable. Concern for one bleeds into a concern for the other two. And all of them are teleologically ordered toward church renewal. For emergents, postmodern philosophy is not an end in itself. Talking about globalism is not just about being hip and up-to-date. Ecclesiology is not the search for doctrinal correctness. In each case, the purpose of the emergent conversation is to reflect upon new ecclesial happenings.

Bearing this interrelation in mind, a critical distinction must also be made. Although epistemology and cultural analysis are important, they are not the substance of church renewal. This is not to say that we should ignore philosophy and culture when we think through our ecclesiology. But it is crucial that these ever-changing factors do not become the decisive ground for church renewal. As the proverb goes, he who marries the spirit of the age will soon find himself a widower. To bear long-term ecclesial fruit, any insight or inspiration found in these aspects should be re-grounded and re-interpreted theologically.

This distinction applies not only to emergent but also to its critics. Too many critics of emergent have focused one-sidedly on its epistemological or cultural assumptions. But all sides of the debate are missing the point once these factors become ultimate. This is not the first time competing proposals for renewal have dead-locked around peripheral matters. William Abraham has shown that the fatal mistake of most proposals for renewal is too much emphasis on epistemology.[6] Such an emphasis betrays the assumption that if we just fix the canons of knowledge, everything else will fall into place. The road to church renewal is an unrelenting focus on the church itself. Our attention should be fixed on the concrete theological question: what does it mean to be the church today?

Where emergent may have the most to offer is precisely in this area of ecclesiology. Impelled by the philosophical and cultural situation, the emergent

conversation has stumbled upon a vital insight for any contemporary ecclesiology. It is to the exploration and development of this insight that we now turn.

Emergent Ecclesiology: Prospects for a Constructive Proposal

The emergent conversation is sprinkled with the language of mission. The initial observation that needs to be made is the move from talk of missions (plural) to mission (singular). The number of mission is not the issue, but rather the change in perspective. The term "missions" usually refers to something that happens elsewhere, on the mission field. It is missio*ns* (plural) because there are many mission fields. The term "mission" signals a shift to thinking of mission as what the church does wherever it is. In other words, wherever the church finds itself, there is its mission field.

One can see how epistemological and cultural analysis might lead one to this insight. Emergents have correctly concluded that North America is no longer a Christian civilization. Unfortunately, too many emergents stop at this situational observation. Yes, the church finds itself in a missional situation on all sides. But more importantly, this situation has occasioned the rediscovery that mission is at the heart of the church. Taking this insight seriously will lead to a thorough rethinking of ecclesiology. In many traditional ecclesiologies, mission is peripheral. Even if it is regarded as indispensable, it is far from the first word spoken. It is does not become a theme unto itself, let alone the central theme. Some contemporary theologians are beginning to make mission a theme, but the emergent church has the freedom and the influence to carry out this insight on a large scale. If there is going to be something called an "emergent ecclesiology," it will be borne out of a thoroughgoing missional interpretation of the meaning of the church.

Some emergent thinkers have begun this process. For instance, Brian McLaren explicitly describes himself as missional. He defines a missional church as being about participating in what God is doing in the world rather than on what God is doing for me.[7] The focus of an emergent missional ecclesiology is thus on the church's relationship to the world. The world is not the location from which the saved are drawn; rather, it is the sphere into which the church is sent to serve the Lord. Mission ecclesiology thus rests on the assumption that God is actually at work outside the walls of the church. God is a sending and sent God, before the church even enters the picture. The church's job is to join God in this mission. God does not use the church to suck people out of the world. God sends the church into the world to participate in its redemption.

What remains to be heard is what this insight has to say to the classic problems of ecclesiology. What does mission imply for the being and act of the church? What does mission have to say about the

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notes of the church? How might mission reframe the problem of individual and community? The remainder of this essay is dedicated to applying the emergent focus on mission to these broader ecclesiological questions. Certainly not all the relevant problems can be addressed, nor can those addressed be treated exhaustively. The hope is that the emergent conversation will be moved forward by means of these minimal developments.

Missional Being-in-Act

One of the most basic problems in ecclesiology is the tension between being and act. Is the church primarily an institution or an event? Is the church something that *is* or something that *happens*? Catholics generally focus on institution, while Protestants speak of event. Yet these generalizations do not always apply, and the divide finds its way into any ecclesiological conversation. And it is not just a theoretical problem. It lurks in the background of every church decision, from building projects to ordination interviews. If an emerging missional ecclesiology has anything new to say, then it will surely cast light on this age-old problem.

A missional ecclesiology will challenge a basic assumption that underlies both sides of the debate. Both the church-as-institution and the church-as-event assume being and act are separable. What if the dominant ecclesiological theme is mission? What will this do to one's understanding of being and act? The church's being would be understood as being sent. This is certainly a state of being. One *is* sent. Yet this state of being intrinsically implies a very concrete action: the church is on the move toward the world.

Without this active movement, being sent is a misnomer. Thus the sent church is a church whose being is in its act and whose act is in its being. Being and act are closely tied in a missional ecclesiology.

So how can an institution be understood missionally? It could retain its institutional shape, provided it is oriented toward the world in missionary action. If the history of mission is any indicator, institutions and missionary action are far from

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mutually exclusive. Institutions can have the resources and momentum necessary to support the mission. Of course, maintenance mode is an ever-present temptation for institutions. But this inward turn should be dealt with at its core, rather than dismissed as an unpardonable sin. The institution that wishes to preserve is the institution that taps into its mission. Mission is its being, not an external action. As a genuine ecclesial institution, the church constantly engages in its mission to the world. Its being subsists in its act, and its act flows from its being. It is the sent church and acts as such.

How does this play itself out in a local church? How does a church overcome the division between being and act? The first and most crucial step is to disavow any and all maintenance mindsets. Turnaround churches will testify that a focus on preservation is a sure way not to preserve their institution. Engaging the mission is the secret to church renewal. The day-to-day operational difference comes in treating its activities as internal to its being as a church. No action of the church can be regarded as ancillary. Any action that the church does is a part of its being. With this mindset in place, the critical questions will follow. Is this activity really an expression of our mission? Does it have anything to do with our being sent into the world? Or does it merely turn us in on ourselves? These are the kinds of questions that will lead churches into decisions that recognize the unity of their being and act.

Missional Notes of the Church

A principle aspect of any ecclesiology is its treatment of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan notes of the church. The creed states that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. How should we understand these notes? How do they relate to one another? Are they visible or invisible? The problem with many ecclesiologies is that they treat the notes as criteria for finding the true church. Thus people look in vain for a church that demonstrates all these notes. No matter how many clever definitions are given for the four notes, they always lead to despair as the church inevitably falls short.

A missional ecclesiology puts a new twist on the notes by rejecting this criteriological use. The notes are not marks or indicators of the church. Rather, they are lamps that light the pathway for the church to walk. This is the path Jesus has walked before the church and down which its Lord now sends the church. Instead of being static attributes of the church, the notes describe the mission of the church that lies ahead. How would this change the way we look at the notes of the church?

First of all, apostolicity would be understood according to its root meaning as "sent-ness." The focus would neither be on apostolic teaching (Protestant) nor apostolic succession (Catholic), but the continuity of the apostolic mission to the nations. The true church is the one that is being sent into the world. Issues of doctrine and authority would not be ignored, but simply relativized as they serve the mission of the church.

Catholicity would be understood in terms of the global reach of the church. No longer would we see catholicity as some sort of achieved consensus, but as a sought-after scope. The true church is the church that is spread throughout the world. Apostolicity and catholicity as traditionally understood often find themselves in contrast to one another. But missional apostolicity actually leads to global catholicity. The opposition between the notes is lifted when they are interpreted in a missional framework.

In a missional context, holiness would be understood in terms of hospitality. Just as God sends the gift of rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous, so the church is also to love both its friends and enemies. Holiness is not about a statically perfect subject, but an outward-motion toward a complete object, namely the world. Holiness thus defined as hospitality is the natural result of missional apostolicity and global catholicity. The encounter with the global other in mission leads to hospitable perfect love. Once again, whereas a more attributive

interpretation of the notes results in opposition, a missional interpretation unifies the notes.

Finally, unity would be understood in terms of the oneness achieved through the reconciling of the world to God through the church's ministry of reconciliation. Yes, the visible unity of the church is to be desired, and its absence is tragic. Yet church unity is not an end in itself; it is intended to serve the church's mission, spilling out into the ever-increasing unity of all creation. It is no coincidence that the ecumenical movement began on the mission field. The early ecumenists saw that unity could serve mission. But just like the previous notes, unity is only found as its flows from the mission of the church. Missional apostolicity leads to global catholicity, which in turn breads hospitable holiness, preparing the way for reconciling unity.

What does this look like? How does this play itself out in missional churches today? The key to embodying the notes is a constant focus on mission. The other notes begin to fall into place when the apostolic mission is present and active. Some local churches have learned to ask missional questions. Some churches (whether they call themselves emergent or not) have sat down with their schedules and asked of each practice, how does this serve God's mission in the world? Where is God moving so that we can join God's mission there? The test comes with the nerve of churches to drop that which does not serve the mission and to add that which does. This does not necessarily lead to a complete overhaul, for many things that do not appear to serve the mission actually do (e.g., worship, fellowship). But asking these tough questions leads to reorienting these activities toward their missional center when they have become self-serving religious practices. More importantly, missional thinking may add new practices that send the church to engage God's world.

Missional Individuals-in-Community

Do Christians make the church or does the church make Christians? Does a gathering of individual Christians make a collective church? Or is there a realistic entity called "the Church" that makes its participants into Christians? This is one of the most basic ecclesiological questions. This perennial tension between individualists and communitarians crops up both between and within any proposal for renewal. One can find both radical individualists and radical communitarians within the emergent conversation. Both claim to value community. That is not the issue. The issue is whether the basis of ecclesial community is found in the collection of free individuals or in the community itself as that which grants communal

identity to its members. An arsenal of arguments are assembled, the battle rages on, and yet no victor is in sight.

Part of the problem in the debate between communitarians and individualists is that it remains solely on the sociological plane. The missing piece of the puzzle is the very center of church life itself: Jesus Christ. The debate will go on in perpetuity as long as it

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Do Christians make the church or does the church make Christians? This is one of the most basic ecclesiological questions.

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remains a struggle between two foci. But when a third point is added, a triangle is formed and a more rich discussion can follow.

So then, how do the Church, the Christian, and Christ relate? The classic way to formulate the basic options was put forth by Schleiermacher. He put it in terms of a contrast between Protestant and Catholic ecclesiological principles:[8]

The Protestant principle is that the relationship between the Christian and the Church depends on the Christian's relationship to Christ.

The Catholic principle is that the relationship between the Christian and Christ depends on the Christian's relationship to Church.

Of course, this leads us into a whole other web of problems. Which principle gives pride of place to Christ? Which principle avoids the perils of the extremes? Are these principles adequate descriptions of the Protestant/Catholic difference? How do we acknowledge both the freedom of Christ and the indispensability of the Church? Is there a way to synthesize the principles? Is there a third option? But at least these are properly theological problems, and therefore we might be able to get somewhere. In other words, a good ecclesiology must deal in Christological currency.

What is the emergent solution to this ecclesiological problem? The secret to navigating Schleiermacher's triangle is the concept of mission. A helpful dialogue partner in this regard is Hans urs von Balthasar, who outlines a missional concept of theological personhood in his *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3.

Balthasar's advance is that our personhood is grounded neither in our individual Christianity nor our participation in the community of the Church as such, but rather in the fulfillment of our mission. We are sent by God. This is who we are, both as individual Christians and as a communal Church. Balthasar gives the example of Paul, who as an individual missionary was on the periphery of the church and yet served the church precisely in his peripheral mission. He notes rightly that the individual and community coincide for Paul, especially when he reflects on his suffering for the church (e.g., Colossians 2).[9]

Here is how one might render Balthasar's insight in terms of Schleiermacher's triangle:

> *The Missional principle is that the Christian's relationship to both Christ and the Church depends on her participation in the mission to which Christ sends the Church.*

The hope is that this missional way of putting things will keep the Christian and the church in proper balance as they subsist in the one mission of Christ. This certainly does not solve all the problems, but it may help to reframe them in a fruitful way. The tension between the individual and the community find their release in missional action. Christ sends the church and the Christian together into the world.

What does this look like at the local level? How do real churches overcome the individualist-communitarian divide by means of mission? The secret is to tell mission stories. The tradition of testimony is finding its way back into contemporary Christianity via the emergent church. The emergent valuation of story is helpful as far as it goes. It will have a long-term impact if it is linked to mission. What kinds of stories should missional churches lift up? The answer is first and foremost stories of missional action in the world. Such stories might be "individualistic" on the surface, for they may tell of one person's cross-cultural encounter. But they may be "communitarian" as a group reports on their recent social action. In both cases, the focus is aimed

outward. Thus the church itself as the sent community is the real subject of the stories, whether individual or communal.

Conclusion

The preceding reflections have attempted to apply the missional insight of the emergent church to classic problems in ecclesiology. Some such applications are necessary for emergent to fulfill the task of church renewal. At minimum, the basic contours of the future ecclesiological discussion have been set forth. Of course, other questions remain, and other emergents may choose to address these questions differently. After all, emergent is a conversation.

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Notes

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[1] The best place to start becoming acclimated with emergent is *http://www.emergentvillage.com*.

[2] Consult the constantly changing wikipedia definition at *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging_Church*.

[3] "Emergent Village: Explore: The Emergent Story;" available from *http://www.emergentvillage.com/Site/-Explore/EmergentStory/index.htm*.

[4] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

[5] The criticism that has gained the most attention is D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with Emergent: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Carson focuses mainly on epistemological issues.

[6] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Renewal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 153f.

[7] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 108.

[8] See F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, new ed., trans. H. R. MacKintosh (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 103–08.

[9] Hans urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

RESPONSE TO JOHN DRURY, "THE SENDING OF THE CHURCH: TOWARD AN EMERGENT ECCLESIOLOGY"
by Laura J. Thelander

John Drury rightly characterizes the emergent conversation as a renewal movement within the church. As with other renewal movements throughout the church's history, a concern for authentic piety reflected in spiritual practices and embodied service to the world marks those communities and individuals who understand themselves to be participants in this open, ongoing emergent conversation. It should be noted that the term "movement" is one that many emergent leaders eschew for a variety of reasons. A "movement" implies the intentional reforming of current conditions and implementing of changes to existing structures that can too easily create a mentality of "us" versus "them," thus undermining the very spirit they seek to foster. Emergent leaders repeatedly express their desire to be non-exclusionary so that at the conversation table an open seat will always be available for a new partner and friend.

Drury provides a helpful overview of the emergent conversation through grouping its themes and concerns into three categories. Rethinking epistemology according to the numerous challenges posed to modernity, identifying and carefully assessing the cultural context in which we live, and envisioning what it means to be church in the midst of a world in flux encapsulate what is admittedly an elusive and ever-evolving subject.

The substantial portion of Drury's essay, though, sketches a proposal for an emergent ecclesiology that is constituted and driven by missional concerns. As such, the remainder of my response will attend to Drury's proposals, seeking both to complement his work and, in certain places, to nuance his analysis in order to provide a thicker description of church according to various emergent voices. Additionally, I will raise questions for the emergent conversation to consider with regard to ecclesiology. These questions do not necessarily contain any implicit critique, but simply seek to further clarify and advance the conversation.

Recognizing and living out of its missional nature is the heart and soul of being the church. By reframing the notes of the church (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) in accordance with God's mission in Jesus Christ who calls the church to follow him and participate in this mission, Drury succinctly offers an accurate picture of emergent church. With this emphasis upon mission, a sharp contrast is made with a church "maintenance" mindset. Drury suggests that "emergent is focused on ecclesial innovation rather than institutional preservation." While there is much truth to this statement, caution should be exercised not simply to embrace newness for its own sake. As Robert Webber has demonstrated in his research and writing, these "younger evangelicals" recognize their need to be more deeply tied to historic Christianity with its traditions and ancient practices.[1] Historic spiritual practices as embodied by the faithful in all diachronic and synchronic expressions of church are central for the emergent conversation's overcoming a historical rootlessness that leaves contemporary Christians less critical about the surrounding culture and more susceptible to its undue influences.

Furthermore, this missional versus maintenance dichotomy might not be a helpful construct for encouraging mutually respectful conversations among various church traditions. According to the website developed to introduce and sustain this emergent conversation, one senses a desire for radical inclusivity that welcomes even those church bodies most associated with institutional structures and concerns:

> We are committed to honor and serve the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal. We practice "deep ecclesiology" – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential. We believe the rampant injustice and sin in our world requires the sincere, collaborative, and whole-hearted response of all Christians in all denominations, from the most historic and hierarchical, through the mid-range of local and congregational churches, to the most spontaneous and informal expressions. We affirm both the value of strengthening, renewing, and transitioning existing churches and organizations, and the need for planting, resourcing, and coaching new ones of many kinds.[2]

While it is true that the emergent conversation is concerned with being authentic church, Drury might

want to reconsider his assertion that "[t]he road to church renewal is an unrelenting focus on the church itself. Our attention should be fixed on the concrete theological question: what does it mean to be the church today?" The persistent danger faced by any ecclesiological proposal is to become unhinged from its theological foundations and to settle for a self-referential conversation. This temptation would not be unique to the emergent conversation. But as Bonhoeffer rightly declared, the fundamental theological question is not ultimately about the church, but rather about Christ ("who Christ really is for us today")[3]. Only by keeping this theologically grounded question alive can the church recognize its proper role of servant as it participates in God's mission to and for the world.[4]

While clearly having pragmatic concerns in relation to the church, the emergent conversation does seek out theological resources for understanding the nature of the church rather than relying upon marketing techniques and business practices that so often inform the church-growth movement. There is ample evidence of a deep commitment to careful and reflective theological study. (For example, an upcoming conference with Miroslav Volf is scheduled for February 2006 at Yale Divinity School.) These intentional conversations and theological studies will be critical for affirming again and again the church's identity and mission as deriving solely from the life and work of the Triune God.

Through its utilization of the internet to create forums for open discussion and its repeated emphasis upon friendships, the emergent conversation values a democratized process. Still, there will undoubtedly be ongoing questions regarding accountability both to the Christian tradition and within the conversation that will eventually lead to issues surrounding authority. How are parameters set in determining what is faithful to the tradition of orthodox Christianity? How is one to understand the authority of Scripture? Are some texts more authoritative than others? What is the status

of the ancient creeds of the church? Is there a place for confessional documents and statements that are authoritative for particular church bodies? Concomitantly, questions surrounding human authority and the underlying issues of power will also emerge as more and more voices of women and voices representative of global Christianity are included in this conversation. In the latter case, it could be that the philosophical and cultural concerns of a North American postmodern context may not have much in common with the greater global Christian community. The emergent conversation is not unaware of these issues. How these diverse voices are able to be welcomed, heard, and understood at the common table, though, will be critical for the vitality and faithfulness of this evolving conversation.

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Notes

[1] See Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) and *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

[2] "Emergent Village: Belong: Community;" available from *http://www.emergentvillage.com/Site/Belong/Community/index.htm*.

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1972), 279.

[4] It should be noted that Drury does take up this Christocentric approach near the end of his article by articulating a missional principle for a proper understanding of the church. Placing this principle at the beginning of his proposal would make this theological foundation more explicit.

CULT(URE) OF GREED:
The Gospel of Wealth and Its Partaking of the Empire's Oppressive Practices
by Carla Rodriguez

The Word of Faith movement is growing at an unprecedented rate. Its teachings on wealth have gathered a substantial following, one that stems from Kenneth Hagin's inception of the movement, develops in its adaptation in diverse communities, and one that extends its reach outside of the United States. The movement's "Gospel of Wealth," permeates the pulpits and Bible classes of this nation's churches, most of which are in poverty-stricken areas. Its critics have eloquently shown the movement's faulty and dangerous theology, emphasizing a healthy hermeneutics of Jesus' teachings regarding prayer, faith, and daily living.[1] It is incumbent that one critiques this phenomenon of the gospel of wealth from another stance in order to address the dire implications that this movement has for our congregations. This paper will look at the apocalyptic imagery of chapters seventeen and eighteen of the book of Revelation, and consider the relationship between God's people and the oppressive practices of empire. I argue that instead of resisting the empire's oppressive practices in the realm of over consumption, the current churches that promote the gospel of wealth are conforming to the pattern of this consumerist culture.[2] As the prophet John called for an end to an accommodating Christianity, so this paper calls for an end to a worldview that conforms to that of an affluent empire that seeks self-aggrandizement at the expense of the well-being of others.

This concern for resistance and anti-imperial practices grows out of my experience with a bilingual (Spanish-English) congregation that propagates the Word of Faith teachings. Located in the Washington Heights area of New York City, throngs of people participate in the lively Sunday services and Friday Bible classes. The charismatic head pastor, who has a passion for church growth – that is, numerical growth – and his circle of co-pastors teach the importance of "giving" and material prosperity. Jesus has become the means to an end of a prosperous life. "Money-talk" goes well with the congregation, as the church's membership consisted of many struggling single-parents, some unemployed, others trying their best with minimum-wage paying jobs, several high school students and many immigrants whose new lives are characterized by the day to day coping mechanisms.

The forty-five minute Sunday teachings on money and prosperity (this is, in addition to the sermon whose climactic conclusion always dealt with wealth) along with church growth schemes never stir the congregation in questioning why the community does not progress, socially and economically.[3] Neither are they motivated to question the systemic racist and gender oppressive policies in this country or to seek better education and jobs. Their worldview is one that idolizes wealth and a personal relationship with God that masks its social and political realities. Instead of conforming to the image of Christ, one who is for the poor, the women, and other marginalized people, adhering to the Word of Faith teachings leads them to be conformed to the image of the U.S. culture of greed.

As infuriated as I am with such teachings, I am more concerned about the way these teachings are countered. Thus, I offer another way of waking up the church, one that looks at the imperative to "come out" of such oppressive practices. This theme of resistance and witness permeates the book of Revelation. Just as the prophet John, we too are confronted with the evil practices of an empire, of a so-called *pax Americana*. The church must not partake of its oppressive tendencies, one of which, the economic practices, will be discussed subsequently. How radical is our Christian witness if we have reduced our belief system to "get-rich-quick schemes"? How faithful are we in addressing the predicament of the human situation if we are not advancing a notion of progress that holds human dignity at its center and that avoids re-inscribing oppressive practices? Are we really witnessing to the God of love, peace and justice, when we preach of progress in terms of the attainment of expensive clothing, SUVs, and money?

Before we can apply our text to contemporary culture, we must begin by studying the text in terms of the author's social context and the literary tools used to make the case. Although this text is rich in meaning and tells us much about the culture and conflict in the first century, the focus will be on the economic

oppression spoken of throughout chapters seventeen and eighteen. In chapter seventeen we read:

> Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.' So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet

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beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication…[4]

We are given a further glimpse into what this character represents in verse eighteen: Rome. Justo Gonzalez states that "to depict the great harlot as 'seated on many waters' was another way of saying that it was a rich city, a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed."[5] This criticism of riches underlies these passages. Yet it must be noted that the author is not criticizing riches per se, but the entire economic system that is characterized by the acquisition of riches at the expense of others. Upon reading these passages one cannot help but to think of the prophet Amos and his denouncement of those who oppress the poor with their luxurious lifestyles.[6] Thus we can read chapter 17 and agree with Gonzalez that the symbolism "is referring to Rome and to its misuse of its might" and that "John condemns the imperial order of Rome, not only because Rome persecutes Christians and Rome blasphemes against God, but also because Rome has become rich by exploiting the peoples of the earth."[7]

Although much can be said regarding the use of female imagery, here we concentrate on what it is representing. Steven Friesen observes that the use of the metaphor of prostitute "for a corporate entity proffered great resources as a rhetorical weapon against Roman authority" and that through this metaphor

> "John could make the necessary connections between cult, commerce, politics, and empire in his critique. The reservoir of meaning inherent in the image of the seven-headed beast was limited mostly to the signification of strength and violence. The image of prostitute, on the other hand, provided symbolic resources for denouncing idolatry, political damnation, and economic exploitation."[8]

This metaphor of the prostitute is incredibly useful as the author uses it to denounce all aspects of the empire, from political to economic oppression. With the use of the beast image, the extent of the exploitation is denounced, from the emperor to the local governors. As the author employs both images (whore and beast) questions of the relation to one another arise. What might John be saying of the economic situation (symbolized by the luxurious garments of the woman) when it is driven or worked out by the strength and violence of politics (symbolized by the scarlet beast of seven heads and ten horns)? There exists a complex and dangerous relationship between both which are explicitly intertwined in these passages.[9] Even more alarming is the presence of the "religious" circles (i.e. the Christian Right, the Word of Faith Movement, TBN etc.), in our contemporary culture, who exert their influence in both spheres.

In chapter eighteen, the prophet John continues his denouncement of the empire's oppressive practices:

> Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, "I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief," (18:4–7)

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza cautions us to understand the imperative metaphorically: "since the

figure of Babylon represents not only the city of Rome but the whole of the Roman Empire, the call to 'come out of it' must be understood metaphorically as a call to separate from Rome's injustice, idolatry, and murder."[10] Gonzalez observes that "John comes to the point where he is actually calling on his readers to resist the existing economic order by opting out of it."[11] This book is clearly political and explicit in its denunciations. Yet this is not the end. Instead, the author calls upon God's people to refuse to partake, to renounce all accommodations with the empire. Even though we may not know exactly what he meant by this departure,[12] it is imperative to acknowledge that God's people are called to live differently, opposing the practices of the empire. If, on the other hand, God's people decide to live in conformity with the practices of the empire then they are strictly in opposition to God. Or, as Brian Blount puts it, "Rome, even for John, symbolized the human inclination to set oneself up in opposition to the intentions of God, and thereby claim for oneself God's privileged position as the Almighty."[13] There is no room for accommodation when it comes to matters of justice.

The three laments in this chapter continue the theme of the political and economic might of the empire, which are by no means mutually exclusive. Pablo Richard interprets each lament as symbolizing the power of the empire. The laments of the kings of the earth (v. 9-10), the merchants of the earth (vv. 11-17a), and the seafaring merchants (vv. 17b-19) reflect the political power, economic power, and trading power, respectively.[14] Thus, this text condemns the ubiquity of the oppression that revolved around unjust economic practices. In fact, it is in the climax of these passages, in verse 20, where we see justice come to its resolve, or as Néstor Míguez puts it, "rejoicing appears as a consequence of justice."[15]

Can this text's denouncement be contained to its first century context? What can we do about the fact that in our present day and age, our churches are partaking of these oppressive practices? How can we make the jump from the first century to our twenty-first century context? Miguez's following words are helpful in our transition:

> "Babylon is not just a city, imperial Rome, or the corrupt Jerusalem of the temple. It stands for whatever system enthrones the marketplace, elevating it to the status of a god and giving it the power to decide who lives and who dies. Babylon stands for whatever turns the human body and soul into merchandise for trade."[16]

Once we acknowledge that our current system does in fact hold the marketplace on high esteem disregarding the well-being of others (key words here being "well-being" and "others"), then we can continue with our critique of such oppressive practices, specifically the teachings of the Word of Faith movement. You may ask yourself, why look at

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There is no room for accommodation when it comes to matters of justice.

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the book of Revelation for such a critique and not the gospels (i.e. Matthew 6:19, 17:20)? How can we counter the worldview espoused by these prosperity teachings with such controversial and violent images as those in chapters seventeen through eighteen? Is this text liberating for those adherents of the gospel of wealth who are poverty-stricken and yet hopeful that their gift will multiply "one-hundred fold"? Schüssler Fiorenza observes the following regarding the power of the images in these passages:

> "[this imagery] is very popular with the peasants and poor of Central and South America who are reading the Bible in Christian base-communities. Since Revelation depicts the exploitation of the poor and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the powerful, the injustices perpetrating stark contrasts between rich and poor, they can read it as speaking to their own situation of poverty and oppression."[17]

In both the imagery from chapter seventeen and the laments of chapter eighteen we observe the author's stance regarding the oppressive practices. If the peasants and poor of other nations are impacted by these images, who is to say that those in communities like the Washington Heights' community will not be stirred as well? Why not look to this book for motivation to resist the practice of deifying the dollar, especially when it comes from the pulpit?

Gonzalez proposes that the task we are embarking on is a difficult one, principally when it comes to moving out of our comfort zone:

> "It is this strange dual situation that stands at the root of our ambivalence toward Revelation.

The problem is not really that the book is too difficult to understand. The problem is rather that we use its difficult imagery and our perplexity over the meaning of this or that metaphor to hide from its message – which is altogether too clear. We are ambivalent about Revelation because we are ambivalent about our discipleship. We are ambivalent about our discipleship because we are quite comfortable in the present order – and yet claim to yearn for another."[18]

To say that we are ambivalent about our discipleship "because we are quite comfortable in the present order" speaks truth to the current situation in our practical Christianity. With the gospel of wealth we have a belief system reduced to repetitive mantras that make God subject to the needs and wants of the believer thus resulting in a "comfortable and neatly

Jesus has become the means to an end of a prosperous life.

packaged" Christianity, where God's people walk along with the flow of society. In a culture that is driven by greed, economic succession, and political domination, it is no wonder that this gospel of wealth has gained such a following. It becomes incredibly practical for churches to teach their congregations steps for their material improvement, especially when these include summons for money. Why use the pulpit for espousal of the pastor's prayer for a Lincoln Navigator? Why not denounce the obsession with big cars, big meals, and expensive clothing? If such condemnation of popular practice were to be criticized, then the church would have to face a difficult reality. Instead of teaching "getting-rich quick schemes," there would have to be community development projects that would include - but not be limited to – the following: GED programs, ESL classes, resume-workshops, political-awareness talks, immigration policy-awareness forums, etc. But this reality is demanding and although churches that adhere to the gospel of wealth may be addressing *some* of what constitutes the "mess of life," their teachings on wealth may be doing the congregation more harm than good.

Yet, you may be reading this and think that it sounds too "secular". Why worry about such matters? Is not that what the government is there for? Should not the church be concerned with "spiritual" matters

like prayer and worship? To which I respond by considering the previous discussion on resisting the empire. We resist the empire by constantly reassessing our daily situation of being *in* the empire but not *of* it. Our act of resistance becomes an act of worship. Worship is not reduced to the singing of hymns and quiet devotional times, as is often taught. NO! "Come out of it!" How dare we *reduce* what is spiritual to how we think we can experience God. If we follow a God that is for justice, peace, and love for all, it is in our resisting opposing practices that we also experience God in our midst. In the United States, a country defined by its obsession with consumerism, we must resist the gospel of wealth, not embrace it! Our pulpits must not be hijacked by the love of luxuries offered by the beast. Instead, our churches must "come out of it," preaching messages of social engagement and establishing social programs that actively participate in the eradication of injustices and that do not reinstate the oppressive system.

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Notes

[1] See Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels* (Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 1979).
[2] I do not claim that these churches are complicit with the Empire in all their practices. Instead, I am specifically looking at the obsession with wealth. Thus, a church may denounce the Empire's systemic Racism, yet in not addressing the ways it packages the ideas of progress and happiness in terms of extensive material gains, it is conforming to the Empire.
[3] Church growth schemes that are practiced alongside the gospel of wealth are systems that take Jesus' sending out of the twelve, as an imperative for the church to "win souls" and instruct them in weekly courses that preface and reflect on a day of "encounter," or a spiritual retreat. After the member climbs this "ladder of success," the process is reciprocated. For more information on how this church implements this system, please see the church's website: *http://www.heavenlyvision.org/development/english/cell-groups.html* .
[4] Rev. 17:1–4; all Biblical quotations will be taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
[5] Justo L. Gonzalez, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (New York: Orbis, 1999), 77.
[6] See Amos 4:1–5.
[7] Justo L. Gonzalez, "Revelation: Clarity and Ambivalence, A Hispanic/Cuban American Perspective," in David Rhoads' *From Every People and Nation: the Book of*

Revelation in Intercultural Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 56.

[8] Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205.

[9] Gonzalez says this best in *Healing,* when discussing the multicultural nature of John and our society: "John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural society of the Roman empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. It was also the result of economic exchange supported by military might…Thus, when we look at our present-day communities and see them as multicultural, multiethnic microcosms in which all the nations, cultures, languages, and people of the world meet, it is important to realize that these communities are also the result of the vast forces, mostly evil forces, that have uprooted people and tossed them upon distant shores. A multiethnic society is a microcosm, not only of ethnic diversity throughout the world, but also the strife, injustice, and oppression that rule the world-or as John of Patmos would say, of the power of the beast" (84–85) .

[10] Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 100–1.

[11] Gonzalez, "Revelation," 57.

[12] Gonzalez contends that "It is impossible to know what John's alternative was…Perhaps what he intended was to have them resist the large-scale economic order by reverting to a barter, limited-scale economy" ("Revelation," 57).

[13] Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 117.

[14] Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 136.

[15] Néstor Míguez, "Apocalyptic and the Economy: A Reading of Revelation 18 from the Experience of Economic Exclusion" in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 255.

[16] Ibid., 261.

[17] Schüssler Fiorenza, 11.

[18] Gonzalez, "Revelation," 60.

BOOK REVIEW

Reinhard Hütter. *Bound To Be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004, pp. x, 313.

Reinhard Hütter's new work, *Bound To Be Free* (*BTBF*), consolidates and expands his previous work, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (*SDT*). For those who found *SDT* to be insightful and a challenge for rethinking the nature of the discipline of theology, they will find *BTBF* to have a welcome consolidation of the previous work that moves toward an expansive and fruitful ecumenical theology. Hütter divides his book into three parts: (i) *Ekklesia*-or, Free to Be the Church, (ii) *Eleutheria*-or, Free to Live with God, and (iii) *Parrhesia*-or, Free to Speak Ecumenically. Hütter covers a wide range of topics in *BTBF*: the Spirit's concrete work as core practices of the church, freedom to be the church as church, knowledge of the Triune God, hospitality and truth, Barth's "dialectical catholicity" and its (purported) concrete deficiencies, Luther's three accounts of the Law with special emphasis on the "third voice of the law" against the antinomians, an ecclesial redescription of the current Aquinas/Scotus debates, and reception of natural law. In Parts Two and Three, Hütter interacts with three Papal encyclicals: *Veritates Splendor*, *Ut Unum Sint*, *Fides et Ratio*, and a treatise from the Pontifical Biblical Commission headed by then Cardinal Ratzinger called "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible." It is clear that Hütter raises the stakes of his past project (*SDT*) to a vital and worthy ecumenical theology. But what is ecumenical theology for Hütter? It is nothing less than Christians drawing nearer to Jesus Christ together by growing, rediscovering, and redescribing their own theological tradition. Hütter argues that traditions can and should grow nearer to Christ, and with *BTBF* it seems there are some real possibilities for differing Christians. For Protestants, *BTBF* is a call to rediscover Luther (and Calvin) in new and ecumenically fruitful ways. For Roman Catholics, it is a call to have ears with openness toward redescription of the Bishop of Rome. For both, it is a call to draw nearer to Jesus, to see that justification and sanctification are two sides of the same coin: to have one without the other is a radical infelicity in our life with God. It is no surprise then that Hütter introduces his work with these remarks, "I am going to show how *ekklesia*, *eleutheria*, and *parrhesia* interrelate and,

indeed, interpenetrate. This mutual interpenetration, or perichoresis, has long been obscured by ongoing Christian division" (1).

Part One begins with his consolidation of *SDT*, where Hütter recounts his previous claim that theology is the poetic work of the Spirit which Christians "suffer" (*pathos*), and so theology is a church practice. In *BTBF*, Hütter argues there are marks of the church as such that are irreducible to the individual person. It is in this that Hütter discusses what he calls "core practices" of the church. There is an inner circle of practices, common to all Christians: proclamation of God's word and its reception in faith, confession and deed, baptism, Eucharist, office of the keys, ordination/offices, prayer/doxology/catechesis, and the way of the cross/discipleship. He then says there is an outer circle of practices that "are not suggested as the church's only practices, but as those necessary to maintain the church as the public of God's own *oikonomia*." There is not space to list the outer circle, but it includes remembrance of saints and martyrs, taking public stands regarding (un)just wars, common life together, helping the poor, and so on. This leads to Hütter's point that the church is a *public*. Theology in the church is informed by all the practices of the church and "without being rooted in the very life of these practices, theology becomes a stale enterprise cut off from its living subject. Without being kept accountable to doctrine, theology becomes... a bad form of philosophy" (54). Since theology is a *pathos* of the Spirit's work, we are qualified by God to know God, which leads into Christian hospitality and truth.

Next, Hütter discusses Barth's ecclesiology and pneumatology. He finds Barth's "critical account of all possible ecclesial communities" conceptually powerful and yet finds this to be a "practice of transcendental ecclesiology." Hütter indicates that this "transcendental ecclesiology... is bought at a high price, namely, the loss of the church's concreteness that does not rest in our witness but in God's own work" (90). From here Hütter proposes that for a vital and ecumenical theology to happen, we should return to Luther's account of the church's marks, which are "holy things" (91). Hütter is not shy to point out that although Barth did not call Roman Catholicism a "church" in his 1928 essay, "Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church," Barth says Protestants need to "occup[y] a common room" with Roman Catholics. Hütter then shows that the "common room" for Protestants and Catholics is akin

to the "common room" that Barth saw Israel and the Church sharing in the doctrine of election. For, "Roman Catholicism clearly has for [Barth] so much ecclesial substance that it can and does amount to a question for the Protestant church" (86).

We find Hütter's main target in *BTBF* to be fragmented and divided churches that need to (re)discover the inner and outer circles of the marks of the church as *the* ways to understand the Spirit's work in Christians' lives. If Hütter can show Protestants and Catholics ways to remember how church as church should be understood, then Hütter may well succeed in carrying forward a truly ecumenical theology.

Chapter 6, "Beyond Dialectics: *Est* and *Esse*," concludes Part One. In it we find a redescription of the current disputes between Radical Orthodoxy theologians and Scotus scholars over analogy and univocity in the predication of concepts of God. Hütter argues that in the proclamation of the gospel we do say, "Jesus is God. Jesus is risen," without ordered equivocation (i.e., analogy) of terms, and thus, we do and should employ univocal terms in this 'first moment' of theological praxis. But Hütter goes on to claim that once there has been the "*est*" in proclaiming the gospel, we can and should move onto the "*esse*" of theological reflection, in other words, onto the *analogia entis*. There is not space enough here to discuss the details. Suffice it to say, Hütter has proposed a hierarchical schema for these current debates by arguing that we start with univocal affirmation and move toward analogical negation. Unfortunately, Hütter gives no reason why we should accept this ordered hierarchy. One might just as well start with negation and end with affirmation (cf. Bernard of Clairvaux and Julian of Norwich) or suppose a synchronic view where negation and affirmation are always already basic phenomena that constitute Christian theological discourse. Lest the overall point be lost, Hütter reminds us that affirmation and negation should remain "in a common room," however they may be schematized.

Part Two is about "living with God," which comes to mean: "How are we to think about the Law and the natural law?" Hütter discusses the 1993 Papal Encyclical *Veritates Splendor* (*VS*), which discusses the question, "What is freedom?" He then summarizes three types of freedom: negative freedom, positive freedom of self-determination, and freedom as such (otherwise called divine and in turn created freedom). Hütter characterizes the "modern daydream and postmodern nightmare" such that *VS* is especially important for Christians and ethicists today. After showing the insights of *VS*'s account of God's Law and our *received* freedom through it, Hütter goes after his foe, which he calls, "the antinomian captivity of contemporary Protestantism" (115). Hütter turns to Luther's writings against antinomianism and the "third voice" (i.e., spiritual sense) of the Law as our way forward out of the "modern daydream and postmodern nightmare" that have engendered this "captivity" of Protestant churches.

Part Three consists of Hütter's proposals for ecumenical theology. Chapter 10 discusses Christian unity and proposes that the Pope redescribe himself as the "first servant" of the gospel as a starting point for Catholics to enter into ecumenical theology with Protestants. Unfortunately, this is the only critique given toward Rome in *BTBF*. Hütter invokes Melancthon's desire for Christian unity and Barth's "common room" metaphor so that Protestants might inhabit a "common room" with Catholics. Chapter 11 deals with the relations of reason and faith and intellect and will. The final chapter (12) is on how Jews are "in" the Bible. It is an augmentation of ecumenical theology in showing how Christians are already in a "common room" with Jews by the very nature of the canon of Scripture. Hütter ends by quoting George Lindbeck, who suggests we live in a time where we can "retrieve critically and repentantly the heritage of the Hebrew Scriptures, apostolic writings and early tradition." Hütter hopes that this opportune calling with all that has been argued up to this point will enable contemporary churches to act like the global and ecumenical community Jesus prayed for them to be.

BTBF is a work full of fertile ideas for ecumenical theology. It is no *Mere Christianity*, but then again, *Mere Christianity* is no *Bound To Be Free*.

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BOOK REVIEW

Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, editors. *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2005, pp. 291.

We might not expect much of "evangelical ecclesiology," calling to mind as it does the regrettable marriage of consumerism and revivalist conversionism—and that marriage's MegaChurch spawn. If this were all there were to evangelical ecclesiology, Husbands and Treier's would be an unwelcome book, and mine would be a very short review. Thankfully, however, evangelicalism can contribute something to ecclesiological discussions other than church-growth techniques, and this volume's essays do an admirable job of bringing some of these contributions to the fore. By way of review, I will draw a handful of these resources together into a single picture, and use this picture to (dis)solve some of the standard ecclesiological disagreements. (This will, in other words, be review-as-constructive-engagement. If you prefer something more summary-oriented, you may want to consult Husbands and Treier's able introduction.)

Such disagreements are by no means slight. Among the contributors themselves, we find opposing views on several of the usual topics: (i) Which has theological priority, individual faith or the church? (ii) What is a "sacrament"—and is the church rightly described as one? (iii) Is the church internal or external to God's being? And (iv) Can we talk about the church in strictly "visible" terms, or must we distinguish between the church's "visible" and "invisible" aspects? As noted, we find opposing views on these questions among the contributors and in the wider discussion. If we look carefully, however, we also see among the contributors some of the moves by which such opposition might be overcome—or at least I shall so argue.

Two resources are especially needful: first, an adequate model of the church's sociality, and second, a workable account of sacramentality. Clarity at these two points will go a long way toward untying some knots down the road. So then: granted that the church is a society of some sort, by what sort of sociality is it characterized? We find one clue in Allen Verhey's essay, "Able To Instruct One Another," where he refers to the church as "a community of moral discourse and discernment" (146), a community which together determines "what is fitting, or worthy of, *the gospel*" (152). Verhey focuses on the church as a

community of *moral* discourse, but we can generalize his position to include *all* normative social practices—the social practices which confer normative status on certain (discursive and moral) performances. The norms implicit in the church's social practices, in other words, authorize (and prohibit) certain sayings and doings. While Verhey doesn't make much of it, there appears to be a model of sociality embedded in such a social-practical approach, a model which runs something like this: my practices are authorized according to the normative social practices of my community, but if authorized, they turn around, so to speak, and become the social practices according to which others' practices may be authorized. When I say, for instance, that "Jesus Christ is Lord," this statement is authorized by the fact that the normative community takes it to be a proper performance. Once authorized, however, this statement takes on its own normative force, as that which authorizes (or prohibits) still other performances. My practices are constrained by communal norms, but they in turn supply normative constraint on other practices.

So where does this get us? First, it allows us to do without one aspect of the old "church-first versus individual-faith-first" controversy, in this sense: the church's proclamation is a condition of individual faith, and individual faith is a condition of church proclamation. Much confusion would be avoided if we were scrupulously to avoid talking about "The Church" as if it were a quasi-personal agent; we can speak, to be sure, of God's agency, and we can speak of the agency of the church's individual members, but it's hard to know what it would mean to talk of "The Church" itself as an agent. (There *is* a way of working out such talk, of course, in that certain individuals can be recognized by members of the church as speaking for all, such that those individuals can be taken to speak and act as "The Church"—but such an account still takes individual agency as its explanatory primitive.) On the account offered here, the church's social practices constrain individual performances, but these (authorized) performances just *are* the social practices which constrain further performances. To put the point in a more familiar idiom, the church mediates the gospel to each individual, while each individual then mediates the gospel to others—and this mediating-to-others *is* the church's mediation. If this is roughly correct, we cannot make much sense of the church-first/individual-first dilemma, for each is the condition of the other. (As for the priority of *God's*

agency over both church and individual, see the next-to-last paragraph.)

This model of sociality helps us make sense of the thorny question of sacramentality, in regard both to the sacraments themselves and to the propriety of referring to the church as a sacrament. Here we can follow Ellen Charry. In her essay, "Sacramental Ecclesiology," Charry describes "the sacramental principle" as God's grace and judgment coming to us through matter (208), and elaborates this coming-to-us-in-matter in symbolic (or: "Symbol-ic") terms: sacraments "themselves shape what we understand and who we are. It is in this sense that symbols lead us into the reality they represent" (211). Charry insists that symbols, unlike signs, do not point the way to something else, but "lead us into the reality they represent" (ibid.). We can, perhaps, gloss this in terms of speech-act theory. A simple example: when, in the relevant context, a baseball umpire stretches his or her hands out to the sides, that constitutes a speech-act—a speech-act which says, "the runner is safe." Moreover, this act doesn't just *say* something, it *does* something—it confers a new, objective status ("being safe") on the runner. Given the normative social practices of baseball, we readily understand such a speech-act. In roughly the same terms, we can understand sacraments as *God's* speech—as "visible words." Given the normative social practices of the church, we understand what God is saying by way of sacraments, and God's saying is also a doing, a conferral of an objective status. In baptism, for instance, God says that my sinful self has died and that my life is now hidden with Christ in God, and God's saying this changes me: this is who I now am. (As Charry helpfully illustrates, a person who is sworn in as a police officer *becomes* a police officer in that swearing-in—just as I become a new person in being baptized.) Likewise, the Last Supper was a powerful speech-act, a shared meal which communicated Jesus' fellowship with the disciples, and in our celebrations of the Lord's Supper, Jesus communicates this same thing to us. (One wants to add: "really.") Just as the umpire's act, within the context of baseball, is speech, so sacraments, within the church, can be understood as God's speech.

So then: if sacraments can be understood as God's speech-acts, what would it mean to talk about the church as a sacrament? We begin with Gary Badcock's assertion, in "The Church as 'Sacrament,'" that the church is "the medium by which Christ is made known and made available in the world" (190). Badcock cautions us about equating sacramentality with superstition (200), for (to put the point in the

idiom we've been using) in the sacraments God uses our public social practices in order to speak, rather than doing something spooky which we can't (by definition) make much sense of. Hence, on this account, at least, to talk about the church as a sacrament is to say that God not only speaks in the church (paradigmatically in scripture, preaching, baptism, and the Supper), but that the church is *itself* God's speech. Not only does the church verbally proclaim that God is with us sinners, and that our future is our being-with-God, but its corporate life itself says this by enacting it. In this sense, the church can rightly be termed a sacrament, insofar as God appropriates it as God's speech-act.

So far, perhaps, so good. Two problems remain: first, in what respect can we talk about the church as participating in (or communing with) God's being? And second, to what extent is the church reducible to human social practices? John Webster, in particular, opposes both (in his essays, "The Church and the Perfection of God" and "The Visible Attests the Invisible"). Does the foregoing offer us any help in resolving these disagreements? Maybe. In opposition to the notion that the church participates in God's triune being, Webster maintains that "genuine attentiveness to gospel verities entails recognizing distinctions—between God and humankind, between Christ and the church, between the works of the Holy Spirit and the testimonies of the sanctified" (78). Popular "communion ecclesiology," on the contrary, asserts that God's triune being *is* communion, and that the church's communion participates in this being.

> ### *Evangelicalism can contribute more than church-growth techniques to ecclesiological discussions; these essays do an admirable job of bringing these contributions to the fore.*

Webster, in good Reformed fashion, counters that such talk is illicit, because there is an unbridgeable ontological difference between God and creatures—or, to be precise, a difference which can only be bridged from God's side. If we agree with Webster on this point, is there any remaining way of talking about the church participating in God's being? Again, maybe. As Webster would surely agree, God's being is not,

primarily at least, to be explicated in terms of substance, but in terms of act: God's being is in-act. God's being is the eternal act of electing to be with humanity, and the economy of grace is the repetition of this being in history. God's being, in the economy, is being-for-sinful-humanity, being-sent, and being-obedient. If there is any proper way of talking about the church participating in God's being it would very likely be in these terms. Darrell Guder, in fact, offers one such description: God, according to Guder, is missionary by nature, and the church's existence just *is* its participation in God's mission ("The Church as Missional Community," 124-5). If God's being is in-act, and one aspect of this being-in-act is mission, and if, further, the church's being is its participation in this mission, then we can say, licitly, that the church participates in the act in which God has God's being. This is a far cry from the usual communion ecclesiologies, of course, but it provides us with at least one way of proceeding beyond the strict either-or of "the church is internal to God's being" vs. "the church is external to God's being." Because God's being is in-act, and because the church participates in this act, there is a distinct sense in which the church participates in God's being—but another sense in which it does not. As Guder's essay suggests, there may be ways of navigating these senses without violating Webster's Reformed scruples.

Finally, we turn to Webster's other qualm: to what extent can the church be reduced to its visible practices? Contrary to fashion, Webster argues that, "rather than focusing on the church as a visible community of practices, contemporary ecclesiology would do well to recover a proper sense of the church's *invisibility*—that is to say, of the 'spiritual' character of its visible life" (96). Webster has misgivings about ecclesiologies which reduce the work of the Spirit to the church's own practices—or at least identify the Spirit's work so closely with such practices that there can be no meaningful distinction between the two. The obvious question, then, is whether (or in what respect) the preceding social-practical account of the church is liable to Webster's objections. The key to Webster's position lies in his insistence upon the Spirit's otherness to the church's practices: the church's practices, Webster insists, depend radically upon the Spirit's work, such that these practices always have their center outside of themselves (102). The Spirit indeed works through the church's practices, but "[n]ot in a way which is convertible into something immanent to the church or

something which the church fills out or realizes in its action" (103). With this, we must certainly agree. But we might ask: how is it that we know the Spirit's irreducibility to our practices? Is it possible that this irreducibility shows up precisely *within* such practices? To paraphrase Karl Rahner, while we must sharply distinguish between the objective reality of God's work and that work's effects in our practices, this sharp distinction only confronts us from within those practices. That God's work is not simply at my disposal becomes all too apparent—and, arguably, *only* becomes apparent—in the church's concrete social practices. We can elaborate this in two directions: first, our normative practices themselves dictate that we not identify God's work with them, which means that the non-convertibility for which Webster argues is internal to such practices. Secondly, if we believe that God appropriates such practices— say, baptizing or proclaiming God's word—as God's speech, this entails that, by definition, they point away from our activity to God's. Their center, in precisely Webster's sense, lies outside of themselves. We can thus infer that the social-practical model elaborated by, say, Allen Verhey, is not of the sort criticized by Webster. Webster's target, rather, is the sort of ecclesiology which collapses the Spirit's work into ours. So long as we recognize our practices' utter dependence upon a work alien to them, there is a way of talking properly of the church in social-practical terms.

With this, we must end. We have suggested at least one way of integrating this volume's various ecclesiological contributions—a way, to be sure, which has been all-too-briefly sketched…and all-too-brief, one suspects, at precisely the critical moments. Nevertheless, the point of the foregoing has not been simply to integrate a handful of more or less disparate ecclesiological positions, but to intimate something of their fecundity for constructive ecclesiology. I am not saying, in other words, that the value of this book lies in the position that I have outlined here. Far from it. Its value, rather, lies in the fact that it provides resources sufficient to fund any number of such positions—and this alone makes it worth far more than the fifteen or so dollars that it costs.

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REFLECTIONS

The following reflections are written by students of Princeton Theological Seminary. The editors of the PTR invited them to write on a subject related to ecclesiology. Their responses, though not necessarily representing opinions of this staff, reflect the diverse personal concerns of this student body, and they provide a stimulating base for conversation regarding seminary education on this particular campus.

Reflections on a Baptismal Model of Church Authority
by Shelli Poe-Messner

The ritual of baptism is a powerful expression of Christian unity. Through it, individuals are grafted into the body of Christ, to live and be nurtured in and with God's people. However, the tension between the corporate body and the baptized individual yield two results that I will reflect upon here. First, individuals are defined, at least in part, by the system into which they have been baptized. In this way, their identities are intricately bound up with that system. Second, for many, there is cognitive dissonance regarding the corporate body's definitions of self and those of the individual. In this situation, the great responsibility that has been given to the Church should be emphasized, and the way to properly bear that responsibility may be gleaned from the ways in which the Biblical texts deal with baptism.[1]

Baptism[2] into the corporate body of the Church may be imaged as a child being nurtured in the womb of the Church. Under the waters of baptism, the individual is from the first virtually indistinguishable from the church in which she is nurtured. Children receive instruction, both explicit and implicit, both consciously and subconsciously, from their teachers (i.e. everyone in the community) about who they are and who they are to become in the body of Christ. In this circumstance, differentiation for the individual between the self and the corporate body to which that individual belongs can be a difficult one.

Because the Church is an authoritative institution for those baptized into it, it thrusts onto its members an identity that is not within each individual's power to completely expel from their lives. Although through psychological processing the individual may be able to control a good deal of her identity within the Church, the individual is never in complete control of her identity. As ethicist Diana Tietjens Meyers explains, it is "a mistake to picture attributes like [being a Christian] as systems of social and economic

opportunities, constraints, rewards, and penalties that never impinge on individual identity."[3] Indeed, the Church shapes and influences the development of the baptized Christian's identity in all facets of life about which Christianity has something to say.

Because many churches have something to say about nearly everything (for better or for worse), the authority of the Church for the baptized should be recognized as a system of power relations. The Church derives its authority from its claim to truth, specifically, knowledge of God. Michel Foucault has done an enormous amount of work describing the relationship between knowledge and power. The relation between knowledge and power is quite complex, but as a preliminary remark it may be said that "truth is no doubt a form of power."[4] The Church's claim to truth gives its leaders the power, in the eyes of its children, to define and determine their identity and actions. In this way, the Church's claim of knowledge is analogous to science's exercise of power in the modern "secular" world. As Foucault explains, "Science also exercises power: it is, literally, a power that forces you to say certain things, if you are not to be disqualified not only as being wrong, but, more seriously than that, as being a charlatan."[5] The analogous aspects of this statement with the Church are obvious enough: if one does not subscribe to the claims of the Church (or a church) as a Christian, the individual involved risks being labeled both theologically wrong and morally, spiritually, and intellectually deficient. Because of this, "The development of all these branches of knowledge can in no way be dissociated from the exercise of power."[6]

The Church's claim to theological truth functions in a number of ways. First, as reflected upon above, the Church holds power over the baptized individual as part of the system to which she belongs cognitively. The Church encourages each individual's thinking to be done under the authority of and in congruence with the teachings of the Church. The second way the Church's claim to truth is exercised is through many churches' claim that theological truth is required for salvation, if not in the great beyond, at least here and now.[7] If a baptized child does not accept the claims of the Church, she is not only mistaken with regard to

truth, but is also "lost" with regard to salvation. The psychological effects of this power that is wielded over individuals within the Church are various and plentiful, depending on the baptized person's specific congregation and how they view the meaning of salvation. Whatever the case, the psychological effects of the Church's power over one's intellectual assent to a particular theological truth are such that the baptized individual is often faced with the decision between intellectual honesty on the one hand and not being labeled a "sinner" and facing eternal or temporal punishment on the other. This situation leads many baptized ones to choose the latter without allowing themselves to think critically about the beliefs to which the Church demands adherence.[8]

Because of this second way in which some churches have used their power, and in light of the lasting impact of the Church's power over individuals within it, the power relations between the Church and its baptized are thus in need of constant suspicion. A number of authors have displayed such suspicion, Christians and atheists alike. As Merold Westphal suggests, "Perhaps we need to see Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, along with Luther and Barth, as expressing a Promethean protest against all the Zeuses of *instrumental religion, the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction.*"[9] In some cases, particular individuals no doubt perform such "reductions", but the Church must also constantly be aware of the way it is using its power, especially since "Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche find this sort of piety to be the rule rather than the exception."[10] I am not here contending that these atheistic thinkers should be the ultimate standard by which Christians should test the Church's truth claims or practices, but that Christians ought to listen to those

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The Church thrusts onto its members an identity that is not within each individual's power to completely expel from their lives.

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who are outside of the power relations between the baptized and the Church in order to gain insight into possible deficiencies among those power relations.

The Biblical witness also calls us back to a right use of power in the Church. Although I make no claims for myself as a Biblical scholar (in the least!), I

suggest that there are six major themes found in the New Testament concerning baptism that we would do well to remember as the Church. The first Scriptural theme that is linked with baptism is repentance. Scripture consistently links baptism with the confession of sin, cleansing from sin, and clearing one's conscience (Matt 3:1–2; 3:7–8; Mark 1:4–5; Acts 2:38; 11:15–18; 13:23–24; 19:4; 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21; Heb 9:9–10).[11] Here the Church is reminded that in all its defining of itself and others, we must consistently remember that we are a sinful people in need of repentance.

Second, in the Biblical text justice is either a pre-condition for baptism or an outcome of accepting the gospel and being baptized (Luke 7:29; 3:12–13). Accordingly, as we baptize, we must unceasingly seek justice for those who are being baptized, such that they are able to live within the Church without oppression and without oppressing others. Let us be aware of the ways in which the Church's power can be used for good and evil, and baptize our children into a just system rather than one that will not allow for genuine and honest growth in the believer.

Third, the Biblical texts connect baptism with belief after having heard the gospel (Mark 16:15–16; Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12–13, 35–36; 16:29–34; 18:8; 19:4), and leading to a proclamation of the gospel (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 9:18–20). The gospel is the mark of the Church. If this gospel is mixed, so as to include bad news for its hearers through the practices or beliefs of the Church, the gospel has been compromised and should be restored.

Fourth, baptism is an authoritative action, and leads to the loyalty or discipleship of the baptized to the baptizer or the baptizer's message (Matt 21:24–27; 28:18–20; John 1:25; 1:32–34; 4:1). Very closely related to this theme is that of unity and disunity, given that one is identified as a disciple of the one who has done the baptizing of that individual (Acts 10:44–48; 11:15–18; 1 Cor 1:13–15; 10:1–4; 12:13; Eph 4:5–6). The implications of this biblical theme concerning baptism have been the main focus of this reflection. In effect, the Church must be struck with the incredible task that has been laid upon her, to make disciples—and not just disciples unqualified, but disciples *of Christ* alone.

The fifth major theme connected to baptism in the Biblical text is the identification of the baptized as participating in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection (Mark 10:38–39; Luke 12:50; Rom 6:3–4; 1 Cor 15:29; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12). In order to wield power appropriately, the Church must die to sin, which entangles (among others) those in power. Only after

such a death can the resurrection life be tasted here and now in the Church.

Finally, baptism is marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11, 16; Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38; but see Acts 8:12–17; 11:15–18; 19:5). The Church may be thus encouraged to faithfully seek guidance from the Spirit who breathes the breath of life into us while we are knit together in our Mother's womb.

In summary, I have reflected upon the tension between the Church and the baptized individual, and have made the very uncontroversial suggestion that individuals are very heavily influenced by the system into which they have been baptized. As such, the Church has a great responsibility toward its members, and should carry out this responsibility in view of the ways in which the Bible speaks of baptism. May we, the Church, always remember our power and our responsibility in forming disciples of Jesus Christ through the ministry and commitment of baptism.

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[1] In this reflection, I will follow the standard convention, using the capitalized "Church" to refer to the universal Church, and the uncapitalized "church" to refer to local churches.

[2] Or infant dedication, as the case may be for those from the so-called "low church" traditions.

[3] Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Social Groups and Individual Identities—Individuality, Agency, and Theory," in *Feminists Doing Ethics*, ed. Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 37.

[4] Ibid., 107.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 106.

[7] One may object that this statement of the salvific significance of all theological claims is misguided because I am overlooking the differences between weightier matters of theology and lesser ones. However, most Christians recognize the value of Christianity with regard to the resurrection and the present life, such that if one will not be punished eternally for wrong beliefs or practices, one will at least suffer the consequences in one's personal life on this earth.

[8] I am not making the claim that all people have had this experience, but am reflecting upon the ways in which some people may have experienced power relations within the Church. People's positive experiences in the Church in this regard should not be overlooked because they are a testament to the ways the Church can rightly use its authority.

[9] Westphal's emphasis. Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 6.

[10] Ibid., 9.

[11] This may also be the sense in which the New Testament portrays John the Baptist's ministry as a preparation for Jesus' ministry; that is, a call to repentance in order to be able to receive the gospel of Jesus (Matt 3:11; 11:12; Mark 1:7–8; Luke 3:3–4; 7:18–28; John 1:31; Acts 1:21–22).

Loving Simply:
A Missing Element within
our Community?

by Darnell Moore

Within the community of believers, one finds a sense of belonging and interconnectedness that travels deep. The Church, Christ's body, becomes a buffer for the pain and rejection that people may experience in the world at large. It becomes a cushion for those who may experience the harsh realities of life by becoming the medium through which others are heard and served. The community shines brightly because it offers a love that is unconditional. It is shaped by a fundamental principle, namely, love thy neighbor as thyself. The Church stands as the beacon of hope and inspiration as well as a safe haven for those who have been written off and secluded from receiving basic human rights like liberty and respect. The people of God demonstrate to others, regardless of their place in life, that all people are God's people and are recipients of God's love through Christ. Thus, the Church stands as an apex within the world, pointing to a celestial Love while beckoning many in the world to explore its grandeur. We are that "city that is built upon the hill that cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:14). Yet it now appears that we often stand guilty of shutting our doors, our ears, and our hearts to many. We have ostensibly replaced love

> ## We must ask ourselves what makes us any better than the non-believers who will walk by the homeless and when moved by compassion clothe or provide them shelter?

and true humility with our own sense of entitlement and judgment, and when we fail to love fully, we distort our purpose.

Examining one of our present debates helps to illuminate this point. At present, there are many arguments within the Church concerning homosexuality. There is one side that insists that the intimate bond shared between partners of the same sex is unnatural and among the gravest sins. Yet there are others who maintain the conviction that the love shared is both natural and of the purest quality. Both sides of

the spectrum argue as if the most important gain from the debate is the opportunity to defend our title as the bearers of Christ's all encompassing truth. All along those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender Christians seek refuge in secure places, many times outside of the Church itself, and are often left disenfranchised and broken because they have no place to call home and no spiritual kin to call their own. On the other hand, the LGBT community of believers separate themselves from other Christians. On either side of the debate one must wonder if all are losing. We must still question how Love-like it is when brothers and sisters seek to separate themselves from their family. Likewise we must question the church's witness when it chooses to exile another rather than welcome and accept others into the fold, regardless of sexual orientation. If the shepherd takes the time to passionately search for the one sheep that leaves the fold then the Church, the grand archetype, must seek out the sheep that have departed or those that it previously shoved away. Similarly, the sheep who knows the voice of the shepherd should hearken and respond to the still small voice of true Love and in the spirit of forgiveness be reconciled to the family that may have turned its back on it merely because its coat is of a different color. Love is the guiding post for believers, and when we choose to shun another because of differences in beliefs, sexual orientation, or otherwise we lose the very feature--nay gift--that should be used to draw others to the community.

If we are to become more compassionate we must begin to self-critique and self-correct. We have to consider and respond to some important questions concerning who we are as defined by our actions. We must also reflect on the deterioration of our witness as faithful ambassadors of Christ when we fail to love. We ought also to begin by posing questions that may have startling answers. For example, we must ask ourselves what makes us any better than the non-believers who will walk by the homeless and when moved by compassion clothe or provide shelter for them? Moreover, what is it that makes us exceptional when we can spend many hours each year in debate amongst ourselves concerning trivial issues while the world is in need of a unified Church armed with proactive initiatives to end chronic homelessness, poverty, and violence? What is more, how can we assume that we are better than others when we, the Church, may often become so deep in our convictions and yet so very limited in our storage of love? We must also continue to realize that our profession as Christians does not make us superior to those who maintain different faith convictions. Should we

embrace other Christians only and neglect the Muslim, Jew, Hindu, and Buddhist? The answer is simply no! Love itself looks past dissimilarity. Love dissolves differences and aggressively seeks that which binds us, namely our common experience as created images of the Divine.

Picture a family in which there are two children living with a loving mother and father. Each day the parents make an effort to ensure their children that the love that they have for each is equal and yet so powerful that it causes each child to feel as if the love that they receive and experience is unique to them. As the children grow and begin to embark upon new experiences in life, one may fail intensely while the other seems to maneuver through life with few difficulties. The self-perceived perfect child, the child who has seemingly managed to get it all right looks down upon the child who appears to falter. Yet, the parent's love never ceases because they recognize that both the child that does right and the child that does wrong are each created parts of their very being. The parents understand that one of the tasks of parenting is to love one's child even if the entire world decides to do otherwise. God, our Creator, loves us as such; even more, the biblical witness asserts that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) thereby acknowledging the equal status of human beings before God as sin-drenched and yet redeemable. God's love must be extended from the *ecclesia* towards all people. The love emitted through the Church must be extended without boundaries. Thus, the Church must seek to invite the non-Christian sisters and brothers to

dine in love. The Christian kin must make the vigorous attempt to reach out to all members of the family. We must also develop the safeguards necessary to prevent the Church from becoming so internally divided--even though beauty shines in diversity--that we fail to recognize the splendor of its unified purpose and identity.

For many, the Church appears to be paradoxical as it proclaims Christ but often does not respond in ways that are indicative of love or reflect the truest attributes of Christ. This is where our discourse concerning its growth and effectiveness should begin. In doing so, the Church can become its own critic maintaining the ability to hold itself accountable for its actions and providing reasonable solutions so that it may continue to be transformed by the grace of God. It is a splendid opportunity for the Church to break down barriers and expand its borders. By refocusing our energy on truthful reflection, potential correction, and invigorating renewal, we accept the challenge of self-renewal. As we seek to increase our proclivity to love our neighbor, thereby reflecting the true Love of God, others can see more clearly Christ represented in our world today.

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Unity Amidst Plurality:
The Witness of the
United Church of Christ
by Adam Tietje

The present disunity within most of the major American denominations almost goes without saying. A web of interrelated practical and doctrinal issues has come to the forefront in the various debates about homosexuality, especially the matter of homosexual ordination and scriptural interpretation.[1] I do not claim to have an adequate solution to get beyond the present impasse. The debate surrounding homosexuality and the church is culturally entrenched and both sides are preparing for a long fight. However, I contend that the United Church of Christ (UCC) stands as a witness to the possibility for Christian unity amidst plurality.

First, let me explain what I am not referring to as the witness of the UCC. In the present context, I do not wish to elevate one side of the debate over against the other. I am not pointing to the reality of ordained homosexuals in the UCC or even the recent General Synod resolution "In Support of Equal Marriage Rights for All" as witness to the Truth of the matter. I personally support open and affirming (ONA) churches, homosexual ordination, and homosexual marriage. I believe that such positions are part of the prophetic witness of the UCC. However, that is not the witness I am referring to here. Second, I am not holding up all or any actual congregations in the UCC as witness. Although, insofar as local churches realize the

This does not mean that the debate is unimportant. One should not ride the fence forever. The issues do make a difference for how a church does ministry.

vision of the UCC, they do provide us with a positive witness. Still, I am not making any claim here about if or how the UCC exemplifies its own intent.

The witness of the UCC is found in the radical understanding of authority in the covenantal relationships the "various expressions of the church"[2] are to have with one another. It is within these relationships that the church comes together united

under and by its "sole head,"[3] Jesus Christ. Article III of the "Constitution of the United Church of Christ" sets forth this covenantal way of relating the "various expressions of the church":

> ARTICLE III. COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS: Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.[4]

The covenantal relationship is expressed *vis-à-vis* responsibilities and rights, collaboration and partnership, and mutual respect, wherein each local congregation has power and authority to govern its own affairs and express its own understanding of Christian faith. No expression of the church is capable of lording over another, especially in order to force or enforce its own understanding of Christianity. With Christ as the sole head of the church, the churches follow his radical call for relationships in the Kingdom of God to be characterized by mutual service in love. This call is answered by the way in which the various expressions of the church—the local churches, the associations, and the conferences—relate to one another. There is a binding involved in this covenant with one another, but it is one freely taken in love. Certainly, this freedom can be taken as power for the sake of itself, the relationship can be ignored, and the covenant can even be broken. However, for autonomy to be read this way is to forget the power and reality of the covenant as a lived expression of Christian unity.

Hence, unity in the UCC is not centered on confessional allegiance, although the UCC certainly recognizes that there are necessary essentials without which unity would not truly be Christian unity.[5] A catch phrase of the UCC in this regard is telling: "in essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity." Unity is found when the church comes together to fulfill its end or aim "that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission" in covenant. The "Basis of Union" document elaborates the church purpose to be as such:

We hold the Church to be established for calling men to repentance and faith, for the public worship of God, for the confession of His name by word and deed, for the administration of the sacraments, for witnessing to the saving grace of God in Christ, for the upbuilding of the saints, and for the universal propagation of the Gospel; and in the power of the love of God in Christ we labor for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood.[6]

The debates surrounding homosexuality need not destroy Christian unity. Indeed they must not. If Christians are willing to relate one to another in covenant, fruitful conversation can occur when "each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others."[7] But if the battle over homosexuality is a zero-sum game, then power will be grasped for and insiders and outsiders will draw lines in the sand, cutting themselves off from one another. This does not mean that the debate is unimportant. One should not ride the fence forever. The issues do make a difference for how a church does ministry.[8]

The General Synod of the UCC has recently staked its claim by supporting homosexual marriage. A great strength of UCC is seen at this point. The resolution made in Atlanta stands not as canon law to be dutifully followed. Rather, it is a conversation partner with which the local churches, associations, and conferences should be in dialogue. While the majority of voting delegates said yes, they did not do so in such a way as to negate the witness of those who said no. Their witness continues in all settings of the church across the country, especially in local churches that do not support homosexual marriage.

Thus, despite plurality, unity can remain and conversation can continue in the UCC and wherever else Christians are willing to come together in mutual relationships where power is a function of covenantal love. No matter how a church community ultimately decides to proceed with respect to the myriad of issues surrounding homosexuality and the church, all who have been called out by God can worship and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ together.

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Notes

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[1] Throughout this essay I do not mean for the terms homosexual and homosexuality to be read narrowly. When using the term homosexual I refer to any and all gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) persons. When referring to homosexuality as an issue within the life of the church I refer to any and all issues the reality of GLBT persons poses for the doctrine and practice of ministry of a church.

[2] The "various expressions of the church" in the UCC are the local church, associations, conferences, and the general synod.

[3] This phraseology comes from the "Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ," United Church of Christ, n.p. [cited 20 October 2005]. Available from *http://www.ucc.org/faith/preamble.htm.*

[4] "Constitution of the United Church of Christ," United Church of Christ, n.p. [cited 20 October 2005]. Available from *http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/constitution.htm.*

[5] Certainly there is a common faith in the UCC—a faith in God rooted in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible—and that faith is confessed. The ecumenical creeds, the confessions of the Reformation, and its own Statement of Faith provide the UCC with resources for doing so. However, confession is seen as a testimony to rather than a test of faith.

[6] The "Basis of Union" was the rationale statement for the union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. See "Basis of Union," United Church of Christ, n.p. [cited 20 October 2005]. Available from *http://www.ucc.org/faith/basis.htm.*

[7] "Constitution of the United Church of Christ."

[8] For example, ONA church x cannot join in ~ONA church y's call for homosexuals to remain celibate, and church y, obviously, cannot join church x in its extravagant welcome of GLBT individuals. If both church x and church y desire to minister to GLBT persons, they most certainly will pursue divergent practices of ministry. This is a bittersweet and, thankfully, penultimate reality we must look beyond in the hope that the unity of the church is not of her own making.

On the Church:
A Personal and Theological Reflection
by W. Travis McMaken

Cyprian, the great Early Church bishop and theologian, once posed this question about the Church: "[W]here and of whom and to whom is one born, who is not a child of the Church, so as that one should have God as one's father before one had the Church for one's mother?"[1] Taken at face value, this observation seems rather benign. As Christians, we all have come into contact with the Church or an agent of the Church prior to our incorporation into the life of the people of God. But, if I stop and think about Cyprian's question, it suddenly becomes somewhat scary. Do I have to have the Church for a mother before I can have a parent-child relationship with God? Furthermore, the imagery of the Church as "mother" is one of nurture and care. Sadly, my experience with the Church has rarely been one of receiving nurture and care. In my experience, the people inside the Church are at least as confused and needy as those outside of it, whether they fully realize this or not. And if I have not truly experienced the Church as a mother, am I able to truly experience God as a father? These questions deal with the very foundation of our existence as followers of Christ. How do we parse the relationship between ourselves, the Church, and the God whom we serve? It seems this is a question of understanding where a true church of the Church is to be found. Are we simply set adrift in an ocean of Christian multiplicities? If we can identify a true church of the Church, then maybe we can receive its nurture.

John Calvin put down an important foundation for enabling us to identify where a true church of the Church is to be found. He wrote, "Wherever we see the

> ## *I can know what I "feel" my needs to be, but are my "felt needs" my "true needs?"*

Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."[2] This moves us a considerable distance along the way to recognizing a true church of the Church. We now know to look for a proper handling of scripture by those who teach and by those who learn, as well as the presence of the sacraments. Yet what does it mean properly to handle scripture and for the sacraments to be present? Each of us will have to answer these questions for ourselves. For some, apostolic succession will be an important factor; for others, an attractive piety is more the key. But does this simply throw the question back upon our own sensibilities? Calvin would answer this question with a resounding "No!" In the beginning of the fourth book of his Institutes, he suggests "it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours."[3] Calvin further argues that "the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone."[4] It is clear that the person of Christ is the thing of fundamental importance for Calvin. The pure administration of Word and sacrament is none other than the pure proclamation of Christ. This is the guide given to us in our task of identifying a true church of the Church. We are not left entirely to our own sensibilities. Rather, we have been given a "hermeneutic key," namely Jesus Christ. Where Jesus Christ is present in Word and sacrament, there we will find nourishment in the bosom of mother Church.

But what of our own sensibilities? In the United States we have such a superabundance of churches that one could conceivably find twenty or more churches within a 10-mile radius of one's home where Jesus Christ is present in Word and sacrament. How are we to determine of which church to become a part? Is not now the time for our sensibilities to come into play? Do not our sensibilities inform us of the kind of nurture that we desire from mother Church? My tendency would be to find the church that I like best – the one that appears to meet what I understand to be my needs. But sometimes I wonder whether I am in a position to know my own needs. Sure, I can know what I "feel" my needs to be, but are my "felt needs" my "true needs?" I think Karl Barth has a helpful way of thinking about this:

> The last word about the Christian community and life in it, and therefore…the meaning and purpose of the…individual Christian, is not in any sense that those united in it are as such saved from the world, sin and death, justified, sanctified and made heirs of eternal life. The goal of the admonition and comfort given them is not in any sense the all-round fulfillment of their personal aims. The Church is not in any sense to be understood as the divine institution for the satisfaction of needs related to this fulfillment, or to the provision and employment of the means necessary and available for it. It is true, of course, that all this is also the experience, reality, gift and

task of the community. We may and must say that…life in the Church includes this as well. But on a closer examination all this will be seen to be subordinate. The Church has its true meaning, and therefore the [person] elected to life in the Church has [her] true personal determination, in the fact that, equipped and empowered by these benefits, instructed by this admonition and comfort, [she] is made serviceable to the Lord of the Church, and therefore…to the rest of the world. That is to say, the Church as such, and every individual in the Church…becomes a bearer and proclaimer of this name and this fact.[5]

The truth that Barth expresses so eloquently and carefully is that, while the nurture we receive from mother Church is indeed part of the story, it is merely a sub-plot. The primary plot in the narrative of the Church, including every local church and every individual person thereby encompassed, concerns the bearing and proclaiming of the name and fact of Jesus Christ. What I feel to be my needs are secondary. They will be met when (and only when) I have taken up this task as part of a community devoted to this same endeavor.

Perhaps the reason I have found it difficult to find nurture within mother Church is not that I have been unable to find a true church of the Church. Maybe it is because I have approached the church in hopes that it would meet what I perceive to be my needs. What if the only way my true needs can be met in the nurture of

mother Church is if I forget about having my needs met at all and instead devote myself to bearing and proclaiming the name of Jesus? But if I bear and proclaim the name of Jesus just so that my needs can be met, is this not disingenuous?

> *Merciful Christ, so captivate my soul that I would forget about my own concerns and live as one who is dedicated to bearing and proclaiming your name and your Gospel. Amen.*

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Notes

1 Cyprian, *Letter 73* section 7.
2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 1023 / 4.1.9.
3 Ibid., 1011 / 4.1.1.
4 Ibid., 1041 / 4.2.1. This is an allusion to Eph 2:20.
5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.2 (ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 428-29.

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