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Contributors

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Ecclesiology is a major new ecumenical and international theological journal devoted to the study of the Church. It is designed to meet the growing demand, in churches, seminaries and among individuals, for theological resources in the area of ecclesiology. A working definition of ecclesiology as a theological discipline might be: ‘The scholarly and critical study of the nature, purpose and actions of the Christian Church.’ Ecclesiology as a discipline is concerned primarily with the theological identity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. It is true to say that ecclesiology is one of the most creative and dynamic areas of theological endeavour today. In a secondary and derivative sense it is also concerned with the identities of particular churches.

Ecclesiology will be published three times per year: in September, January and May. In our design of each issue and selection of material we aim to be guided by the three criteria of sound research, clarity of presentation and contemporary relevance. Our main areas of focus will be the central concerns of the theological study of the Church: mission, ministry and unity.

First, there will be a mission focus. This journal aims not to be inward looking, focusing on the domestic agenda of the churches, but to take its cue from the mission of the Church in the world (or, to put it more correctly: the Church’s role in the missio dei). The missiological thrust of the journal will include the study of the Church’s evangelistic task, its engagement with increasingly secular cultures and pluralist societies in the West, and its interaction with other faiths.

Second, there will be a ministry focus. Within the shaping context of mission, the journal will offer a platform for the study of Christian ministry, ordained and lay. It will sponsor explorations of the biblical and theological meaning of ministry (diakonia). It will deal with the three ministerial tasks (tria munera) of teaching, sanctifying and governing – in other words, the triple ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral responsibility in the Church. It will consider the commissioning and authority of the ministry, the message it proclaims, its ordering according to biblical and patristic patterns, its liturgical roles and the various skills that lay and ordained ministers require in today’s demanding society.
Third, there will be a unity focus. The journal will wrestle with current ecumenical debates about the nature of Church unity, spiritual and visible, mystical and institutional. It will attempt to cover the main bases of ecumenical theology that see Christian unity expressed in: a common confession of the apostolic faith; a mutually recognized and interchangeable ministry; a common sacramental life focused on Christian initiation, centred on baptism and the Eucharist; and connected structures of leadership, pastoral oversight (*episkope*) and decision-making.

In addition to these core areas, the journal will also feature articles exploring wider issues in ecclesiology, including those to do with the identity of the Christian Church in the modern or postmodern world, and methodological questions concerning the place of ecclesiology within Christian theology.

Some other key features that help to identify this journal are:

- A broad interdisciplinary approach to ecclesiological issues, taking in biblical studies, church history, historical and contemporary theology, applied theology and ecclesial ethics.
- An ecumenical and international (particularly transatlantic) flavour, reflected in the make-up of the Editorial Team and the complexion of the wider body of editorial consultants (the Editorial Advisory Board).
- A policy of combining scholarly depth and rigour with clear relevance to current issues facing the churches, in a way that appeals to practitioners, such as bishops and other church leaders, clergy and ministers, lay people, seminarians and students – as well as to teachers of theology and other scholars.
- An imaginative approach to book reviews, with adequate space allocated for review articles, including in-depth evaluation of significant theological publications, and the occasional dialogue between author and reviewer.

Altogether, *Ecclesiology* is more than another theological journal: it is a journal with a cause – to advance the mission, ministry and unity of Christ’s Church. Our intention is to intersperse general issues with themed issues that provide a coherent resource for study and reflection. This first issue is a general one. The second issue will be a themed issue on ‘Holy Order’, with articles on aspects of Ministry and Ordination from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist and Anglican perspectives.

PAUL AVIS  
*Convening Editor*
On Evangelical Ecclesiology*

JOHN WEBSTER

ABSTRACT

Evangelical ecclesiology describes the relation between the gospel and the church, and in particular the way in which the grace of the triune God constitutes the church as the communion of saints. Consequently: (1) The doctrine of the church is shaped by an account of the perfection of God, i.e. the sufficiency and fullness of God’s being and act. This perfection is not inclusive (as in some communion ecclesiologies), but is to be thought of as a movement of grace in which God determines himself for fellowship with his creatures. (2) The visibility of the church (pervasive in modern ecclesiology) is properly a spiritual visibility, which the church has by virtue of the Spirit’s act. The primary visible acts of the church are its attestations of the presence and action of God.

The Church and the Perfection of God

1. The task of evangelical ecclesiology is to describe the relation between the gospel and the church. It is charged to investigate the sense in which the existence of a new human social order is a necessary implicate of the gospel of Jesus Christ, asking whether the life of the Christian community is internal to the logic of the gospel or simply accessory and accidental. Are gospel and church extrinsically or internally related? The answer proposed here can be described summarily in the following way: The matter of the gospel is the free majesty of the triune God’s grace in his works of creation, reconciliation and completion. Out of the plenitude and limitless perfection of his own self-originating life as Father, Son and Spirit, God determines to be God with his creatures. This directedness of God to creatures has its eternal origin in the purpose of the Father. The Father wills that ex nihilo there should come into being a creaturely counterpart to the fellowship of love which is the inner life of the Holy Trinity. This purpose is put into effect by God the Son, who is both maker and remaker of creatures, calling them into being and calling them back into being when they have fallen into estrangement from the one through whom and for whom they are made. And the divine purpose is perfected in the Spirit. The

* What follows is a much compressed version of two lectures at a conference on ‘The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology’, held at Wheaton College in April 2004.

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Spirit completes creatures by sustaining them in life, directing their course so that they attain their end, which is fellowship with the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. Fellowship with God is thus the mystery of which the gospel is the open manifestation (Col. 1.26).

This manifestation does not simply take the form of an announcement. As the manifestation of God’s purpose for his creatures, it is limitlessly potent and creative; it generates an assembly, a social space (we might even say a polity and a culture). In that space, the converting power of the gospel of reconciliation becomes visible in creaturely relations and actions. That visible form is not a straightforward natural quantity, but is possessed of a special kind of visibility, created by Christ and Spirit and so perceptible only at their behest. Yet there is a form of creaturely assembly to which the gospel necessarily gives rise, and that form is the communion of saints.

The Christian faith is thus ecclesial because it is evangelical. But it is no less true that it is only because the Christian faith is evangelical that it is ecclesial; that is to say, its ecclesial character derives solely from and is wholly dependent upon the gospel’s manifestation of God’s sovereign purpose for his creatures. The church is, because God is and acts thus. It is, consequently, an especial concern for evangelical ecclesiology to demonstrate not only that the church is a necessary implicate of the gospel, but also that gospel and church exist in a strict and irreversible order, one in which the gospel precedes and the church follows. Much of the particular character of evangelical ecclesiology turns upon articulating in the right way the relation-in-distinction between the gospel and the church. ‘Relation’, because the gospel concerns fellowship between God and creatures; ‘distinction’, because that fellowship, even in its mutuality, is always a miracle of unilateral grace. It is this particular modality of the encounter between God and creatures – what Christoph Schwöbel calls a ‘fundamental asymmetry’1 between divine and human being and action – which is to characterize both the church’s constitution and its continuing existence.

Evangelical ecclesiology is concerned to lay bare both the necessary character of the church and its necessarily derivative character. Two consequences follow. (1) An account of the gospel to which ecclesiology is purely extrinsic is inadequate. Much modern Protestant theology and church life has been vitiated by the dualist assumption that the church’s social form is simple externality and so indifferent, merely the apparatus for the proclamation of the Word or the occasion for faith conceived as internal spiritual event. Among some strands of evangelical Protestantism, assimilation of the voluntarism and individualism of modern political and philosophical culture has had especially corrosive effects, not only

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On Evangelical Ecclesiology

inhibiting a sense of the full ecclesial scope of the gospel but also obscuring much that should have been learned from the magisterial Reformers and their high Protestant heirs. 'So powerful is participation in the church,' wrote Calvin, 'that it keeps us in the society of God.' (2) Nevertheless, ecclesiology may not become 'first theology'; the ecclesiological minimalism of much modern Protestantism cannot be corrected by an inflation of ecclesiology so that it becomes the doctrinal subtratum of all Christian teaching. In mainstream Protestant theology of the last couple of decades, this inflation has been rapid and highly successful: among those drawing inspiration from theological 'postliberalism', among Lutherans who have unearthed a Catholic Luther and a catholic Lutheranism, or among those who describe the church through the language of 'practice'. The attempted reintegration of theology and the life of the church which stimulates such proposals is, of course, of capital importance, as is the emphasis upon the church as ingredient within the economy of salvation. Yet the very density of the resultant ecclesiology can sometimes become problematic. Ecclesiology can so fill the horizon that it obscures the miracle of grace which is fundamental to the church's life and activity.

The required alternative to this ecclesiological hypertrophy is not the atrophied evangelical ecclesiologies which have (not without justice) been the object of Catholic critique. The task is not that of putting the church in its place so much as recognizing the place which is proper to the doctrine of the church in an orderly unfolding of the mighty works of God. What follows is a preliminary sketch of such an account, focused on two related themes: (1) the relation of the church to the divine perfection, in which it is shown that the church is the communion of saints, the assembly of those whom God has consecrated for fellowship with himself through his works of election, reconciliation and consummation; (2) the

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relation of the visible life and activity of the church as human society to its invisible being as creature of Word and Spirit. 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. Such distinctions are not to the taste of most modern ecclesiology, and sometimes maligned as the sour fruit of what de Lubac called a ‘separated theology’ of nature versus supernature. But some deeper account of them is surely needed. Such an account would show that that – made well, under the discipline of the gospel – these distinctions can reflect the proper order of creator and creatures, restored in Christ and consecrated to blessedness by the Spirit, and gathered now into the communion of saints as they hasten to the courts of God’s glory.

2. A doctrine of the church is only as good as the doctrine of God which underlies it. This principle – which is simply the affirmation of the primacy of the doctrine of the Trinity for all Christian teaching – means that good dogmatic order prohibits any moves in ecclesiology which do not cohere with the church’s confession of the triune God and of the character of his acts. In terms of the task of constructing a theology of the church, therefore, this means that in its ecclesiology Christian theology must be especially vigilant to ensure two things: (1) that the full scope of the Christian confession of God is operative, and not merely a selection of those divine attributes or acts which coordinate with a certain ecclesiological proposal; (2) that the norm of ecclesiology is the particular character of God as it is made known in revelation, rather than some common term in ecclesiology and theology proper (such as the term ‘relation’, which is almost ubiquitous in contemporary discussion). Theology must pause before beginning its ecclesiology to ensure a proper demarcation of duties between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of the church; impatience at this point will return to haunt us (indeed, it already has).

It is for this reason that I propose to start from a conception of God’s perfection. The prevailing voices in ecclesiology would bid us begin elsewhere, most often in a doctrine of the economic Trinity; that they are mistaken in doing so, and that adoption of this starting-point can lead to misconstrual of the relation-in-distinction between the gospel and the church will, I hope, become evident as the argument proceeds.

What is meant by God’s perfection? In this context, God’s perfection refers to God’s metaphysical rather than his moral greatness. God’s perfection is not only God’s maximal moral goodness; it is the repleteness of his life, the fullness or completeness of his being, the entirety with which he is himself. As the perfect

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one, God is utterly realized, lacks nothing, and is devoid of no element of his own
blessedness. From all eternity he is wholly and unceasingly fulfilled. Conceived
in this way, God’s perfection stands in close proximity to other divine attributes:
for example, to his infinity, that is, the unrestricted character of his being and of
his presence to creatures; or to his sovereignty, which is the entire effectiveness of
God’s righteous rule over all things. ‘Perfection’ is, however, a more comprehensive
concept, indicating the full majesty in which God is who he is.

The perfection of God is primarily a formal but a material concept; it speaks to
us of his life and activity. The perfection of God’s life is the fullness of unity and
relation – that is, of love – which God immanently is as Father, Son and Spirit. In
that perfect circle of the unbegotten Father, the Son who is eternally begotten, and
the Spirit who proceeds, God is unoriginate and therefore supremely alive with
his own life. He does not receive his life at the hand of any other, and no other can
modify or extend his life, for he is incomparably alive. The perfection of God’s acts
is the pure completeness of the divine work. Like God’s life, God’s acts are self-derived
and therefore self-directed and self-fulfilling. There is no hiatus or insecure pause
between God’s purpose and its accomplishment in his work, no point at which God
must call upon the assistance of other agents to bring his work to its completion. In
his freedom, God may choose to consecrate other agents for his service. But such
consecration does not indicate some lack in God, but rather the mercy with which,
in his fullness, he chooses to dignify creatures by electing them for his service. And
God’s work is wholly spontaneous and wholly effective, setting aside all resistance
and reaching its end with effortless potency.

Although this conception of God’s perfection may initially appear rather
remote for the doctrine of the church, the ecclesiological implications are ready to
hand. God’s perfection is the repleteness of his life and act. But within that life and
act there is a movement or turning ad extra, in which out of his own perfection
God wills and establishes creatures. How are we to conceive the relation between
God’s perfection and the creaturely realm? More particularly: is God’s perfection
an inclusive or an exclusive perfection? To speak of inclusive perfection would be
to say that the fullness of God includes as an integral element of itself some reality
other than God – that, because creatures are in some way called to participate in
God’s life, his life is co-constituted by their participation. To speak, on the other
hand, of exclusive perfection would be to say that the fullness of God is a se and
in se. God’s relations to that which is other than himself are real; but they are the
expression of God’s freedom, not of a lack, and in those relations creatures do
not participate in God but are elected for fellowship and therefore summoned
into God’s presence. To put the question in terms of ecclesiology: is the church,
as the assembly of creatures in relation to God, intrinsic to God’s perfection, or
externally related to God’s perfect being and work? Does God’s perfect being
include the being of the church?
3. In order to open up these ecclesiological dimensions, we may begin by considering what has been the most important trajectory in the theology of the church over the last forty years, namely ‘communion ecclesiology’. The use of the language of koinonia to speak of the nature of the church, its relation to God, and its place in the mystery of salvation is now pervasive. The theology of koinonia is generally judged to have proved itself potent in inter-confessional dialogue – Anglican and Roman Catholic enthusiasm has been a decisive factor – especially because of its apparent capacity to provide a comprehensive account of the nature of the church on the basis of which particular confessional divisions (about eucharist, ministerial order, or justification, for example) can be reconceived. Moreover, its rooting of ecclesiology in a particular theology of revelation and salvation has offered to a range of Christian traditions the resources to develop a richer ecclesiology untramelled by inherited inhibitions. For Roman Catholics, it has offered a context in which juridical concepts of the church can be related to the life of the church as saving mystery; for many Anglicans, it has enabled a fresh articulation of the theology of the historic episcopate as a ‘sign’ of unity; for a significant body of Lutherans it has made possible a move away from the externalism of inherited doctrines of the church and a reintegration of the theology of the church and the theology of salvation.

Communion ecclesiology is not so much a consistent set of doctrines as a diverse collection of approaches to topics in ecclesiology, sacramental theology and ecumenics, all bearing some strong family resemblances. For our present purposes, two aspects of communion ecclesiology call for attention: its dogmatic arrangement

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On Evangelical Ecclesiology

and its metaphysical substructure. Both turn on a key question: what is the relation of the church as creaturely communion to the perfection of the divine communion of Father, Son and Spirit?

In terms of the dogmatics of communion, we may begin from a summary statement of communion ecclesiology from one of its finest expositions, Jean-Marie Tillard’s Eglise d’Eglises:

Communion with God (himself Trinitarian communion) in the benefits of Salvation acquired by Christ (whose incarnation is a realistic communion between God and humanity) and given by his Spirit, the fraternal communion of the baptised (recreating the connective tissue of torn apart humanity), all of it made possible by communion in the once-and-for-all (irreversible) Event Jesus Christ which communion in the apostolic witness guarantees throughout the centuries and which the Eucharist celebrates (sacrament of communion). There is the Church in its substance.

From that, three interlocking doctrines can be teased apart. First is the doctrine of God. The Christian doctrine of God is the doctrine of the Trinity, conceived as a koinonia of divine persons. God’s unity is thus not undifferentiated homogeneity but the rich life of communion between Father, Son and Spirit, a communion which is mutual and open. Second is the doctrine of salvation. Made in the image of God, the end of the creature is to participate in communion with God and all other creatures. Sin is a turn against this creaturely finality, a breach of communion with God and therefore with others (the language of sin as individuality is pervasive). The end of salvation is the reintegration of human persons in communion, both with God and with others. And this end is not attained simply in an extrinsic or declaratory fashion – as it were by a divine announcement of the end of hostilities – but intrinsically: by the incarnational union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ. The Word’s assumption of humanity is thus not merely a device to secure a divine sin-bearer, but the resumption of communion between God and creatures. Third is the doctrine of the church. The incarnational communion is savingly extended in the church, for the church is intrinsic to the Christological mystery of the union between God and humanity. Christology and ecclesiology are mutually implicating. That is, the church is not simply an external assembly around the saving action of God, or an arena in which the benefits of salvation are distributed: rather, as communion it is ingredient within the mystery of salvation. In the church’s communion, salvation is not so much confessed as bodied forth; the church is saved humankind, the social reality of salvation. Consequently, as the gathering of the new humanity into communion with God in Christ, the church is essentially visible as a form of common life and a part of the world’s historical and material economy.


In eucharistic theology, this means that the eucharist cannot be thought of as a retrospective memorial of an absent event, or an illustration of an inner spiritual transaction; rather, it is communion: participation in Christ, salvation present and operative and not simply indicated. In terms of the order of the community, this means that – minimally – office is indispensable to the public shape of communion in the apostolic gospel. Further, in terms of the church’s relation to the world, this means that the common life of the church is constitutive of the perfection of human life and culture, and hence that an ecclesiology of communion lies at the centre of a comprehensive account of human social goods. In short: ‘our faith should never make separate what God from the beginning has joined together: sacramentum magnum in Christo et in ecclesia’.9

With this we move to the second aspect of communion ecclesiology, namely its metaphysical substructure. The key text here is Henri de Lubac’s (still untranslated) work *Surnaturel*.10 Like most of the ressourcement thinkers, de Lubac was not a philosophical theologian but an exegete of the tradition. In *Surnaturel*, however, he gave sustained attention to the borderlands of doctrine, spirituality and philosophy, and the work has had an extraordinarily wide impact on Roman Catholic theology and beyond in the last fifty years: the work of figures as diverse as von Balthasar and Milbank is unthinkable without the possibilities which de Lubac opened. For de Lubac, an ecclesiology of communion – in his parlance, ‘catholicism’ – stands opposed not only to a ‘separated theology’ but also to a ‘separated philosophy’ – that is, a metaphysics constructed around a systematic separation of nature from supernature. Like its more dogmatic counterpart *Catholicism*, *Surnaturel* attempts to dismantle the edifice of neo-Scholastic dogmatics and apologetics which de Lubac believed had been erected on the foundation of a duality between nature and grace, a duality absent both from the fathers and from Thomas, and which led inexorably to the secularization of nature and its alienation from the reality of God. Nature considered on its own comes to acquire an immanent finality, having purely natural ends, and so as ‘pure’ nature can be conceived apart from any transcendent ordering towards participation in God. The resultant dualisms – between supernatural and natural, between time and history, between material form and inner substance – not only render impossible a Christian ontology of creatureliness; they also have destructive ecclesiological effects. Christ as supernature and the church as nature are placed in a purely extrinsic relation. Corresponding to the invention of natural philosophy—natural law and natural theology, that is—we have in effect a natural ecclesiology, shared by both Trent and the Reformers. In Catholic form, this natural ecclesiology abstracts the church’s hierarchical and juridical institutions from the

9 de Lubac, *Catholicism*, p. 28.

incarnational and eucharistic self-communication of God in Christ; in Protestant form, the result is a drastic internalism, in which the visible forms of the church can never be anything other than secular occasions for the occurrence of unmediated grace.

In terms of our theme, the central question raised by both the dogmatics and the metaphysics of communion ecclesiology is this: does an ecclesiology which starts from a theology of the perfection of God have built into it from the beginning the corrosive dualisms which de Lubac sought to expose and which lead inexorably to an ecclesiological extrinsicism? By way of response, I suggest that for an evangelical ecclesiology the options are not restricted to either a theology of koinonia or the drastic dualism which de Lubac and others rightly sought to scour out of modern Christianity. A fresh set of possibilities are opened for us by a dogmatics of the mutuality between God and creatures. Such a dogmatics attempts to articulate the difference between God and his human partners, not because it is infected by naturalism or extrinsicism, but because the theology of creation and of reconciliation alike require us to conceive of the relation of God and creatures as a relation-in-distinction, that is to say, as covenant fellowship.

4. The doctrine of the church may not be developed in such a way as to compromise the perfection of God and Christ; but theology cannot protect itself from the compromise by the draconian measure of eliminating the church from the economy of salvation. What is required is not a reduction of ecclesiology to vanishing point, but a more precise specification of God’s perfection, out of which an ecclesiology of fellowship can be generated. We must return, therefore, to the doctrine of God.

God is perfect; but his perfection includes a movement outwards, a turning to that which is not God, as its lordly creator, reconciler and consummator. Of this turning – wholly miraculous, beautiful beyond expression – we need to say at least three things. (1) It is not the first but a second movement of the being of God. The first movement is the eternally mobile repose of the Holy Trinity, the life, peace and love of Father, Son and Spirit. This is the movement of God’s majestic repleteness. To this movement there corresponds a further movement in which the fullness of God is the origin and continuing ground of a reality which is outside the life of God: ‘outside’, not in the sense of unrelated, but in the sense of having its own integral being as a gift rather than as an extension of God’s own being. This second movement, in which God wills and provides for free creaturely being is a necessary movement. It is not externally necessary, for then it would not be a divine movement but a divine reaction (and therefore not divine); rather, it is internally necessary because it flows from the eternal divine counsel to be himself also in this second movement. (2) This movement is a movement of holy love. God’s holy love is the perfect integrity with which he consecrates creatures for fellowship with
himself. He consecrates first by willing the creature, then by creating, by preserving
the creature, by reconciling it to himself, and by directing it to its perfection. God’s
holiness is loving because it is not mere divine self-segregation but God’s self-
election for integrity in loving fellowship with what is not God; God’s love is holy
because it sanctifies creatures for fellowship with the Holy One. (3) This movement
is, therefore, most properly and fundamentally a movement of God’s grace. Grace is
sovereignty directed to the creature’s well-being. The perfection of God’s lordship
– his unbroken, effortless rule – is wholly to the creature’s good. Through it, God
wills, allows and nourishes the creature’s being and so gives life.

In this second movement of holy love and grace, then, God’s perfection is actual
as his determination for fellowship. It is this movement which is the ground of
the church. The basis of the church’s being is the very simple and entirely unfathomable
divine declaration: ‘I am the Lord your God’. Expressed dogmatically: ecclesiology is
a function of the election of the saints, and the first statement in ecclesiology is thus
credo sanctorum communio. Accordingly, communio is a derivative ecclesiological
concept, a function of the twin notions of election and holiness. What is gained in
this way is the retention of a sense of God’s perfection, and thus of the distinction
of the church from God, distinction which is the primary condition for fellowship.

In deploying these doctrines, however, we need to extricate them from some
of their more familiar uses in the context of ecclesiology. Though holiness has an
established place as a creedal mark of the church, it has attracted relatively little
modern discussion, especially in ecumenical ecclesiology, where unity, catholicity
and apostolicity have commonly been at the forefront of the discussion because
they act as markers of confessional divergences. Where the holiness of the church
is discussed, it is usually in the context of sanctification. However, holiness as
ecclesial sanctity is properly a subordinate aspect of the church’s holiness; primarily,
to speak of the church as holy is to indicate that it is the assembly of the elect. To be
the saints is to be those summoned by the divine call: ‘You will be my people’. This
association of the church’s holiness with its election entails, in turn, a refocusing of
the ecclesiological use of the doctrine of election. The near-exclusive association
of election with the inscrutability of divine choice in high Protestant orthodoxy meant
that, in ecclesiology, election served to emphasize that mere membership of the
visible ‘mixed’ church is no guarantee of eternal security. The consequence which
was ready to hand was a moralization or subjectivization of election, its enclosure
within the drama of Christian selfhood. This ‘concealed naturalism’ is deeply
distorting because it converts an affirmation about God into a knot of anxiety.
Most properly, election concerns the sovereign directedness of the being of God to

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11 Authoritatively in Lumen Gentium 39–42.
p. 142.
us, the divine self-determination to summon, protect and bless a people for himself. In short: the church ‘stands by God’s election’. As with holiness, the ecclesiological force of the doctrine of election is to emphasize the twofold truth of the divine originality of fellowship with God, and the directedness of the ways of God to the church as ‘God’s own people’.

What, then, is meant by the church’s confession; ‘we believe in the communion of saints’? (1) In theological talk of the church we are in the realm of the confession of faith. Truthful apprehension of the church’s existence and nature cannot be derived from consideration of its natural history in and of itself, but only from the knowledge of the electing and consecrating work of God. The church exists by virtue of that work, having no naturally spontaneous source of life and no immanent capacity to sustain itself as a spiritual company. The church’s nature as the creaturely sphere in which we are in the society of God derives wholly from God’s electing and consecrating presence. And so it is only in faith’s knowledge of the works and ways of God that the church can be seen for what it is: the fellowship of the saints. In formal terms: the concept of ‘church’ is not deducible from or resolvable into the concept of ‘sociality’ (even Christian sociality). Though the life of the saints necessarily is a social form, it is this only by God’s choice and calling. In a sense, therefore, to confess the communion of saints is simply to repeat the confession of God, Father, Son and Spirit. (2) The object of the confession is the communion of saints. God’s saints are God’s elect. God’s elect constitute a human assembly which has its existence solely on the basis of a divine decision, not on the basis of creaturely prestige. ‘It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were fewer than all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you …’ (Deut. 7.7–8). God’s election is enacted in the work of salvation, which gathers a people by extricating them from absolute jeopardy (bringing the people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage [Deut 5.6]; being summoned out of the condition of being ‘no people’ into the condition of being ‘God’s people’ [1 Pet. 2.10; Hos. 2.23]). That divine saving work sets the newly-created people of God apart from all other possibilities, for consecration closes off any other ways in which the people might be: to depart from this God is simply to revert to the non-state of being ‘not my people’. In so doing, election places the people in the sphere of God’s blessing, since it is determination for life. And blessed in this way by their election, the people is summoned to obedience, to live in accordance with the law – that is, the given shape – of its nature as the people of the covenant. To sanctity as consecration there corresponds sanctity as active holiness. (3) The object of the church’s confession is the communion of saints. Election generates a polity, a common life. Yet it is a common life of a distinctive kind, not just a modulation of

Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.i.3 (p. 1015).
sociality in general. It is the communion of the saints, and so determined at every point of its life by the shock-waves which flow from God’s reconciling work. It is regenerate, eschatological communion, common life transfigured. At the heart of its polity is an event and presence which cannot be assimilated, of which the community is no extension, and in which it may not participate. That event and presence is the perfect being and work of the community’s Lord, the Holy One in its midst.

But what is meant by a human common life which has the Holy One in its midst? In particular: how does this common life relate to its Lord? What is the relation between the Holy One and the saints? Because the relation is most properly conceived as a relation-in-distinction, the ‘communion’ between the church and its Lord is best articulated as fellowship rather than participation. Here much may be learned from Calvin’s account of the union of Christ and the church. That there is such a union is for Calvin a deep truth of the gospel:

that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts – in short, that mystical union – are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar, in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body – in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.¹⁴

But this ‘fellowship of righteousness’ is utterly different from the crassa mixtura, the gross mixture of deity and humanity which Calvin abhors in Osiander.¹⁵ It is, rather, a ‘spiritual bond’,¹⁶ not ‘essential indwelling’.¹⁷ That is, the church’s relation to Christ is a fellowship in which distance or difference is as essential as union, for it is a mutuality ordered as precedence and subsequence, giving and receiving, and so one from which any identification is excluded. Later in the Institutes, Calvin gives this exquisitely condensed trinitarian statement of the matter: ‘[A]ll those who, by the kindness of God the Father, through the work of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ, are set apart as God’s property and personal possession; and...when we are of that number we share that great grace.’¹⁸

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¹⁵ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion III.xi.10 (p. 737).

¹⁶ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion III.xi.10 (p. 737).

¹⁷ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion III.xi.10 (p. 737).


There are Christological ramifications here to which we will shortly turn; but before doing so, we should not fail to note that more is at stake than establishing the precise nuances of the term *koinonia*. At its core, the matter concerns the right relation of God and creatures; and so, as often in fundamental ecclesiology, the ontological dimension has once again to claim our attention. Ecclesiologies which make much of the notion of communion commonly assume a particular understanding of the ontological difference between God and creation.

The patristic concept of theosis is the most precise and compendious possible evocation of the end for which God creates us. The difference of Creator and creature is indeed absolute and eternal, but precisely because God is the infinite Creator there can be no limit to the modes and degrees of creatures' promised participation in his life.19

From this vantage-point, to lay emphasis upon fellowship (rather than mutual participation) between the Holy One and the saints is simply to repeat an ontological error, one in which God and creatures are conceived in extrinsicist and therefore competitive fashion, such that they are considered to be inversely rather than directly proportional. But this collapses too much together. For, on the one hand, it is a basic entailment of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* that God and creatures are in a certain sense inversely proportional. Yet, on the other hand, this is not to deny any relation between God and creatures. Rather, it is to say, first, that at key moments in the drama of God’s ways with the world – in establishing his covenants, in taking flesh, in the Son’s glorification and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – God acts alone. And it is to say, second, that even in God’s uniting himself to the communion of the saints and in his acting through the church, there is no transgression of the boundary between the Holy One and his saints. God may choose to act through creatures; in doing so, he elevates the creature but does not bestow an enduring capacity on the creature so much as consecrate it for a specific appointment. And in its acts, the creature remains wholly subservient, ministerial and ostensive. The ontological rule in ecclesiology is therefore that whatever conjunction there may be between God and his saints, it is comprehended within an ever greater dissimilarity. That, in brief, is what is meant by the saints’ communion with the Lord who is the Holy One.

To sum up so far: a theology of the church needs to be undergirded by a theology of divine perfection; this is accomplished by tying ecclesiology to election, thus generating an account of the church as differentiated, asymmetrical fellowship with God. We turn finally to the Christological dimensions of God’s perfection in relation to the church.

19 Jenson, ‘The Church as *Communio*’, p. 3.
5. In his extraordinary early book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* – together with de Lubac’s *Catholicism* one of the magisterial ecclesiological texts of the last century – Michael Ramsey argued with characteristic economy and cogency that ‘the meaning and ground of the church are seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the mysterious sharing of the disciples in these happenings’. But: can this notion of the church’s sharing in Christ be coordinated with an affirmation of the perfection of God? Can we say with Ramsey that ‘the history of the Church and the lives of the saints are acts of the biography of the Messiah’?

A first line of reflection concerns the manner of Word’s becoming flesh. The incarnation is a wholly unique, utterly non-reversible divine act; in it the Son of God unites himself to the man Jesus. It is an instance of itself; it is not a figure in some more general union of divinity and humanity. Its origin lies wholly outside creaturely capacity, and there is no pre-existing creaturely coordinate of its occurrence. The humanity of Jesus is thus not a creaturely quantity which is annexed or commandeered by God, for then it would precede the incarnation as its creaturely condition. The incarnation is unilateral; it rests on the unqualified freedom of God to be and do this. Moreover, because it is irreversible, the incarnation is not extensible. It is categorically different from (for example) the providential presence of God in and through creatures, and has no analogies or repetitions in other realities. Nothing can qualify its insistent singularity. It is for this reason that the incarnational union is a *personal* or *hypostatic* union, not a union at the level of the natures in some general conjunction of deity and humanity. Only as such can its perfection be grasped.

This is not, of course, to deny the genuineness and integrity of the humanity of Christ, but simply to specify the conditions of its occurrence. Nor is it to deny the consubstantiality of the incarnate one with us. In Christ God unites himself to us; but he does so only in this one person, and this one person is not the symbol of some more general communion or identity. He is the one mediator; he alone is the place of union between God and creatures. But what kind of union? It is a union in which he elects to share with us the benefits of fellowship with God. He acts as our reconciler, taking upon himself our alienation from God, and so taking it away. He assumes our humanity; but he does not do this by absorbing it into his own and so enabling us to partake of his union with the Father. Rather, he assumes our humanity by freely taking our place, being and acting in our stead. His humanity only gathers all others into itself as substitute; it includes all in itself only as it also excludes them. Whatever else may be meant by speaking of the mystery of the church as the marital union between Christ and his body, it cannot mean any subtraction of the incarnation’s uniqueness.

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Second: Christ’s perfection is enacted in his death and resurrection. To the incarnational *filius unicus* there corresponds the soteriological *solus Christus*. In the mystery of salvation, Christ acts alone, and acts with finality and sufficiency. Of that action, no ecclesial repetition is possible, because none is needed. That the incarnate Son’s death and resurrection constitute the baptismal figure of the church’s existence is, of course, indisputable. But the church’s dying and rising are wholly contingent upon the nonrepresentable death and resurrection of its Lord. To talk of the church ‘entering into the movement of his self-offering’ is possible only if by that we mean that the moral life-act of the church is a faint analogy to Christ’s saving intervention; as a eucharistic motif it undermines the *alien* character of Christ’s person and work, and so compromises their perfection and grace.

Third, therefore, great ecclesiological significance is to be attached to the resurrection and ascension. In an important way, those events indicate the proper distance between Christ and his saints, even as the saints are ‘in’ him. Christ’s exaltation at Easter and after the forty days enacts his over-againstness to the church. The church is risen with Christ; but it is not risen as Christ. He himself is properly withdrawn at the ascension, which marks his transcendence as the enthroned Lord who is the object of the saints’ worship. The saints, to be sure, are made alive together with him, and raised up to sit with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2.5–6). But the undergirding principle here is: ‘by grace you have been saved’ (Eph. 2.5); even as the church is raised with him and sits with him in heaven, it is only as the creature of resurrection mercy and as the subject of his lordly rule. ‘Christ is indeed properly called the sole Head,’ says Calvin, ‘for he alone rules by his own authority and in his own name.’ Calvin makes the point against the trespass of the redeemer’s rule which can attend some views of ministerial order in the church; but beneath it lies a theology of Christ’s perfection in which, as the risen and ascended Lord who in the Spirit exhibits his benefits, he transcends the church even as he enters into intimate fellowship with it.

All this, then, amounts to a cumulative suggestion that the notion of the *totus Christus* – of Christ’s completeness as inclusive of the church as his body – will be impermissible if it elides the distinction between Christ and the objects of his mercy: impermissible on the grounds of the doctrines incarnation, salvation and the exaltation of Christ. Christ, says de Lubac, bears ‘all men within himself … For the Word did not merely take a human body; his Incarnation was not a simple *corporatio* but … *a concorporatio*.’ At this point, a responsible evangelical ecclesiology must beg to differ: any attempted synthesis of Christology and ecclesiology must be broken by ‘the all-shattering truth of *unus solus creator*.’

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22 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.vi.10 (p. 1110).
Christ’s perfection is not integrative or inclusive, but complete in itself, and only so extended to the saints in the work of the Spirit who shares ‘the immeasurable riches of his grace towards us’ (Eph. 2.7).

But does not this leave us with an essentially negative ecclesiology, a church without an enduring, active form in the world? Is there a real ecclesial horizontal which corresponds to the incarnational and soteriological vertical? Is there a visible history of the saints?

‘The Visible Attests the Invisible’

1. ‘The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth’ – thus Bonhoeffer at the beginning of a remarkable set of reflections on ‘the visible church community’ in Discipleship. The consensus of much recent ecclesiology has been to confirm the correctness of Bonhoeffer’s judgment: no ecclesiology can be adequate which does not give primacy to the church’s visibility. Here I propose an evangelical sed contra: 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. And, as a corollary, the active life of the church is best understood, not as a visible realization or representation of the divine presence but as an attestation of the perfect work of God in Christ, now irrepressibly present and effective in the Spirit’s power. This combination of emphases, on the ‘spiritual visibility’ of the church, and on the character of its acts as ‘attestations’ of God, reflects an orderly account of the relation between God’s perfection and creaturely being and activity, neither separating nor confusing the divine and the human. The church is the form of common human life and action which is generated by the gospel to bear witness to the perfect word and work of the triune God.

Like the concept of communion, that of visibility is pervasive in contemporary ecclesiology. The ‘turn to the visible’ – whether in ecumenical concern for visible

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unity, or in the deployment of notions of ‘social practice’ to describe the church – clearly raises large questions for the ecclesiological sketch offered here, with its orientation to the perfection of God. The most pressing issue is this: Does an account of the church which is governed by the theology of God’s perfection inevitably underplay social and historical materiality, above all by rooting the ontology of the church in pre-temporal election, and in the imparticipable person and work of the incarnate Son? Is not the inevitable result a ‘spiritualization’ of the church, in which the church’s social form is extrinsic to its being, and its public life is secularized or naturalized as just so much accumulated debris? And does this not lead to an overwhelming emphasis on the passivity of the church, segregated as it is from the acts of Christ, of which it is always and only a recipient? Does the church then not become simply a void created by the incursion into time of pure grace as an alien power? In short: what becomes of the church’s visibility?

2. We must be clear from the outset: the issue is not whether the church is visible, but rather what kind of visibility is to be predicated of the church? Nothing of what has been said so far about the perfection of God, about election or about the unique efficacy and sufficiency of the person and work of Christ should be taken as a denial of the church’s visibility. What is required, however, is careful dogmatic specification of a notion of visibility, to ensure that it is demonstrably coherent with the Christian confession of God. This specification will entail both an account of the church’s visibility as ‘spiritual’ visibility, and an account of the acts of the church as attestations of the word and work of God.

The ‘visible’ church is the ‘phenomenal’ church: the church which has form, shape and endurance as a human undertaking, and which is present in the history of the world as a social project. The church is visible in the sense that it is a genuine creaturely event and assembly, not a purely eschatological polity or culture. It is what men and women do because of the gospel. The church is a human gathering; it engages in human activities; it has customs, texts, orders, procedures, possessions, like any other visible social entity. But how does it do and have these things? It does and has these things by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit. Only through the Holy Spirit’s empowerment is the church a human assembly; and therefore only through the same Spirit is the church visible.

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings to completion the work of reconciliation by generating and sustaining its human correspondent; in this way, the Spirit perfects creatures so that they attain that for which they were created. The work of reconciliation is triune. It has its deep ground in the eternal purpose of the Father, who wills creatures for fellowship. This purpose is established by the Son, against all creaturely defiance and in mercy upon creaturely distress, overcoming alienation and reconciling us to God. The office of the Holy Spirit is then to apply to creatures the benefits of salvation, in the sense of making actual in creaturely time and space
that for which creatures have been reconciled – fellowship with God and with one another. In perfecting creatures, sanctifying them so that they come to take the form purposed by the Father and achieved for them by the Son, the Spirit is, according to the creedal confession, the 'giver of life', for creatures can only 'have' life in relation to God who creates and defends life. But as the life-giver, the Spirit is also confessed as 'Lord'. He perfects creatures through acts of transcendent freedom; he cannot be folded into creaturely causality as a kind of immanent life-force. Always he is Spiritus creator, renewing creaturely existence by the event of his coming, rather than simply being some sort of continuous substratum to created being. The Holy Spirit is the church's God.

This rooting of the doctrine of the church in the doctrine of the Spirit has one crucial effect. It ensures that the third element of the economy of salvation – the making real of reconciliation in human life and history – is as much a divine work as the first element (the Father's purpose) and the second (its accomplishment by the Son). In ecclesiology we are within the sphere of the perfection and sovereignty of God. There can be no sense in which, while God's first and second works are pure grace, his third work involves some kind of coordination of divine and creaturely elements. The history of the application within the creaturely realm of God's reconciling will and deed – that is, the history of the church – is the history of the new creation, the history of the resurrection of the dead. ‘You he made alive’ (Eph. 2.1). This sheer gratuity is fundamental to the church's being: the church is what it is because in the Holy Spirit God has completed the circle of his electing and reconciling work, and consummated his purpose of gathering the church to himself. The church, therefore, is natural history only because it is spiritual history, history by the Spirit's grace. And so also for the church's visibility: it is through the Spirit's work alone that the church becomes visible, and its visibility is therefore a 'special' or 'spiritual visibility', created by the Spirit and revealed by the Spirit.²⁷

More closely described, the church's visibility has its centre outside itself, in the ever-fresh coming of the Spirit. The ‘phenomenal’ form of the church is therefore the phenomenal form of the church only in reference to the Spirit's self-gift. The phenomena of church life – words, rites, orders, history, and the rest – do not automatically, as it were ex opera operato, constitute the communion of saints; rather, the church becomes what it is as the Spirit animates the forms so that they indicate the presence of God. But if visible phenomena are not in and of themselves the final truth of the church, that is not because they are phenomena and therefore unspiritual, secular, pure nature. It is rather because of the kind of phenomena that they are: they are indications of the presence of the Spirit who bears Christ to the

²⁷ See here K. Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), pp. 656–58; IV/2, p. 619; IV/3, p. 726.
church and the world and so fulfils the Father’s purpose. And so if the phenomena of the church really are the church’s visibility, this is not because they constitute a ‘true epiphany of God’s reign in the flesh-and-blood community of the faithful’. It is, rather, because through the Spirit they are consecrated, taken up into God’s service as the witnesses to his presence and act.

Accordingly, knowledge of the church cannot be derived in a straightforward way by deduction from its visible phenomena and practices. Only through the Spirit’s agency are the phenomena to be grasped as phenomena of the church. The church is known as God is known, in the knowledge which comes from God’s self-communicative presence, of which the human coordinate is faith. Only in this spiritual knowledge is the church known and its phenomena seen as what they are. Faith does not, of course, perceive a different, ‘hidden’ set of phenomena, behind the natural-historical realities of the church’s visible acts. It sees those acts as what they are: attestations of God. ‘We need not … see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands,’ writes Calvin. Why? Not because behind dead nature there lurks the real, supernatural, invisible and intangible church. Indeed, it is only in the church’s visible human instrumentality, in the voice of its teachers, for example, that God chooses to be heard. Calvin is very far indeed from any principled separation of the sensible from the spiritual. Rather, the church is visible to the perception of faith, for it is to faith that the church steps out of the obscurity and indefiniteness of an historical phenomenon and becomes fully and properly visible as the creature of the Spirit. ‘[T]he fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were already visible.’

The visibility of the church is thus a spiritual event, spiritually discerned. This is not to espouse an ecclesiological occasionalism, as if the church lacks a durable identity and is simply a string of discreet moments in which the Spirit from above seizes dead forms and gives them temporary animation. That would be to deny that the Spirit really is promised and really is given to the church. But: how promised and how given? Not in a way which is convertible into something immanent to the church, or something which the church fills out or realizes in its action. The Spirit is promised and given as Lord and giver of life. And as Lord and giver of life he is other than the church, the one in whom the church has faith, to whom the church is obedient, and for the event of whose coming the church must pray: Veni, Spiritus creator.

To sum up: the church is visible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Its life and acts are the life and acts of the communion of the saints by virtue of the animating power of the invisible Spirit, and known as such by the revealing power

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29 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion IV.i.3 (p. 1015).
30 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion IV.i.3 (p. 1015).
of the invisible Spirit. Such an account of the church’s visibility attempts to govern itself according to the fundamental norm of ecclesiology, namely the perfection of God in his works towards the saints. This perfection is as true in pneumatology as elsewhere; the outpouring of the Spirit, his gracious descent upon the community, is not a breach of the Spirit’s integrity. But this norm does not assume a secularization of the church through a separation of inner from outer. It simply acknowledges that the Spirit’s life-giving and revelatory agency is fundamental to the church’s being, including its visibility in creaturely time and space.

3. If this is the way in which the church ‘takes up space on earth’, then what is to be said of the basic shape of the church’s action? What kind of visibility does the church have? The suggestion I wish to explore is that the active visibility of the church consists in attestations of the word and work of the God who is its creator, reconciler and consummator. In speaking of the acts of the church as acts of attestation or witness, we are trying to answer the question: what is the relation between the visible undertakings of the church and their ground in the perfect work of God? In view of the perfection of God’s grace, and in view of the special visibility which the church has on the basis of the fact that it exists in that grace, the notion of witness tries to express the permanently derivative character of the work of the church.

We may orient our explanation of this by returning to the doctrine of election. The church of Jesus Christ is a ‘chosen race’ (1 Pet. 2.9). It exists by virtue of the declaration of the Son in which the eternal resolve of the Father is realized: ‘You did not choose me; I chose you’ (John 15.16). This being the case, the church is characterized by a particular dynamic or movement. This dynamic is its origin in the determination of God the Father, whose purpose is set forth in the Son and brought to human fruition in the work of the Holy Spirit. Its origin in the divine resolve is what gives the church its specific character and dynamic of being chosen. Divine election must not be thought of simply as a background or preliminary reality, perhaps the church’s ultimate ground or origin but not an operative factor in giving an account of what the church actually does. Quite the contrary: the dynamic of being chosen determines the modes of common life and activity in which the church is visible. Its forms of life, its principal activities – all the ways in which it disposes of itself in time and space – have to be such that they testify to God.

31 The ecclesiological primacy of witness is pervasive in vol. IV of Barth’s *Dogmatics*. See further Chr. Schwöbel, ‘Kirche als Communio’ and ‘The Creature of the Word’. See also T. F. Torrance’s deployment of the somewhat similar notion of ‘hypodeigma’, in *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), pp. 94–97 – though Torrance envisages a good deal more continuity between divine and human action than I am suggesting here.
Testimony is astonished indication. Arrested by the wholly disorienting grace of God in Christ and the Spirit, the church simply points. It is not identical or continuous with that to which it bears witness, for otherwise its testimony would be self-testimony and therefore false. Nor is its testimony an action which effects that which it indicates; the witness of the church is an ostensive, not an effective, sign; it indicates the inherent, achieved effectiveness which the object of testimony has in itself. Strictly subordinate to that which it is appointed and empowered to indicate, raised up not to participate in, extend or realize a reality which lies quite outside itself, the church lifts up its voice and says: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As Barth says of John the Baptist (probably his favourite biblical character): ‘for the very reason that he is a genuine witness [he] only makes reference to another. He has no subsistence of his own. He is without importance of his own. He only functions as he bears witness of another and points away from himself to another.’

Crucially, that to which the church’s acts point is not something inert – locked in the past or in transcendence. The church points to the prevenient perfection of the triune God. It witnesses to God the Father’s omnipotently effective purpose which in Jesus Christ has broken through the realm of deceit and opposition, which is now supremely real and limitlessly active in his risen presence, and which is unleashed with converting power in the Spirit of Christ. Of all this, the church is an attestation.

Developing a theology of the church’s visible acts along these lines carries with it the considerable advantage of avoiding the transference of agency from God to the church. It ensures a conception of the church’s action in which the work of God is not a reality awaiting completion, but a perfectum of unrestricted, self-realizing power. Yet this does not mean a reduction of the church to pure passivity, so that its only visible feature is emptiness, waiting upon the self-presenting word of God. Attestation is human activity bent to the service of God. If the church takes with full seriousness that to which it bears witness, it is not indolent or irresponsible, precisely because the gospel is a summons. But it is a summons to act in particular ways which are shaped by the truth of the gospel. That means that the church is appointed to visible activity which is in accordance with the given fact that the world is the sphere in which the triune God’s antecedent grace is wholly victorious and resplendent. To act in accordance with that given fact is, indeed, to act: think, speak, judge, assemble, celebrate, suffer, heal, share, bless. But such actions have no centre in themselves, no pure spontaneity. They are acts which arise from trust and hope in the action of God in Christ now present through the Spirit. They are wholly defined by the basic statement which underlies and conditions all other statements about the church: the Holy One is in your midst. The church is by virtue of the

being and acts of another; and its acts are enabled by and witness to the one to whom the church owes itself and towards whom it is an unceasing turning.

4. The concrete forms of the church’s attestation of the gospel are the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. In Word and sacraments, the church sets forth the presence and activity of the living Jesus Christ. Word and sacrament are not ‘realizations’ of Jesus Christ’s work, for in the Holy Spirit he is self-realizing. They are, rather, a reference to his being and his work, a work which has been achieved with royal freedom and full effectiveness, and which now sets itself before the church in its converting effect. Word and sacrament are the church’s visible acts which let God act.

A full account of the theology of Word and sacrament cannot be attempted here. I restrict myself to some remarks about the ministry of the Word in the church. To do so is not to follow the sacramental minimalism which has attached itself to some bits of the evangelical tradition: often espoused as a reaction to what is perceived to be lush sacramentalism, this minimalism is deeply disruptive of the church’s exposure to the gospel, and all too often goes along with a dreary moralization of the Christian faith. Rather, I concentrate on Word because modern ecumenical ecclesiology has shown surprisingly little interest in the topic, and tends to have concentrated its energies elsewhere, on the sacraments (especially the eucharist) and on the theology of ministerial order. An effect of this has been to promote a theology of the church in which the ministry of the Word does not always play a determinative role in understanding the character of the church’s action. Sacramental agency has usually been assumed to be paradigmatic of the church’s action, and fundamental questions about the relation of God’s work to the work of the church have commonly been approached by trying to sort out a number of issues in eucharistic theology (a good example is discussion of the ‘sacrificial’ character of the eucharist as the quintessential ecclesial act). The result is that ‘eucharistic ecclesiology’ presents itself as self-evidently normative; and I hope to redress the balance a little.

At the beginning of the Apocalypse, John writes thus:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet … Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle around his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades’ (Rev. 1.10, 12–18).
What instruction might we receive here for an understanding of the church as the communion of saints which – like John the seer – bears witness to the Word of God (Rev. 1.2)?

Jesus Christ is alive: gloriously and resplendently alive, because alive with the life of God. He is risen from the dead, and so he is neither inert nor absent, neither a piece of the past nor one who possesses himself in solitude and remoteness: he is majestically and spontaneously present. And this presence of his is communicative or revelatory, in a way which is wholly free, self-originating and authoritative: he presents himself in royal power and glory, and with axiomatic certainty. He is life and therefore presence. There is no creaturely initiative here; his self-communication is prior to any human seeking. The ‘loud voice’ which John hears (Rev. 1.10) is ‘behind’ him, anterior to him; John ‘turns’ (v. 12) to the voice which is already addressing itself to him; the voice is not the voice of a creature but ‘the sound of many waters’ (v. 15); from the mouth of the speaker there issues no human speech but the ‘sharp two-edged sword’ of divine judgment. To see and hear this one is to be utterly overwhelmed: ‘I fell at his feet as though dead’ (v. 17). But the son of man does not slay; he speaks. And as he speaks, he declares himself: ‘I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades’ (vv. 17–18). He declares himself to be present to all times and places, catholically real because infinitely alive, spreading abroad the knowledge of himself and of his own repleteness.

Why begin here? Because what John describes is the fundamental situation of the church which seeks to testify to the Word of God. The church is the assembly which is addressed by this son of man. The situation in which the church speaks is, therefore, not one in which the church is as it were called upon to fill a silence, or to take some initiative in order to communicate with Jesus Christ. It is a situation in which this son of man, undefeated and alive, is in the church’s midst (v. 13), not on the periphery, and is already lifting up his voice and making himself known. The church speaks, because it has been spoken to. Only because there is a word from this son of man – only, that is, because there is a Word of God – is there a word to be uttered by the church. And this word of the church is therefore nothing other than ‘witness to the Word of God’ (Rev. 1.2). In its word, the church does not activate, demonstrate or justify the Word which has already been spoken; it simply attests that Word in its inherent clarity and self-demonstration, announcing what has already been announced with kingly power.

This, then, is the fundamental dynamic of the Word in the church; this is what occurs when the church hears the announcement of the gospel in Holy Scripture and attests what it hears. For Jesus Christ announces himself to the communion of saints in the canon of Holy Scripture. In the words of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ declares himself. The crucial factor here is Jesus Christ’s personal, non-transferable agency – that is, the fact that he himself declares himself. At his
glorification to the Father’s right hand, Jesus Christ does not resign his office of self-communication, handing it over to the texts of Scripture which are henceforth in and of themselves his voice in the world. Rather, in the texts of Holy Scripture, the living one himself speaks: Scripture is his prophet and his apostle. Holy Scripture is ‘holy’ because it is sanctified: that is, it is set apart by God for the service of his self-announcement. Scripture is the elect, consecrated auxiliary through which the living one walks among the churches and makes known his presence. For this reason, Scripture is a transcendent moment in the life of the church. Scripture is not the church’s book, something internal to the community’s discursive practices; what the church hears in Scripture is not its own voice. It is not a store of common meanings or a Christian cultural code – and if it engenders those things, it is only because Scripture is that in which Jesus Christ through the Spirit is pleased to utter the viva vox Dei. Consecrated by God for the purpose of Christ’s self-manifestation, Holy Scripture is always intrusive, in a deep sense alien, to the life of the church.

All this is to say that the church assembles around the revelatory self-presence of God in Christ through the Spirit, borne to the communion of saints by the writings of the prophets and apostles. This divine revelation is ‘isolated’ – that is, it is a self-generating and self-completing event. God is known by God alone: this is central to a proper understanding of the church’s relation to Scripture. Scripture is not to be thought of as one element of a movement of revelation which is completed by the church’s acts of reception and interpretation. Scripture is not an initial stage of a process of divine communication which is only fully realized in the life of the church – whether that life be conceived through a theological notion of tradition or through hermeneutical notions such as readerly reception. Scripture bears witness to divine revelation in its perfection. It is for this reason that Holy Scripture is to be spoken of as possessing the properties of clarity and sufficiency. Both these ways of speaking of Scripture emphasize the completeness of Scripture, the fact that in Scripture the church encounters a fully achieved divine communication: in this sense, they are parallel to the sacramental notion of ‘real presence’. Of course, neither ‘real presence’ nor scriptural clarity and sufficiency eliminate creaturely acts of reception. But they do reorder those creaturely acts. And so when, therefore, the church ‘interprets’ Scripture, it does not bestow upon Scripture a clarity which Scripture does not already possess, or bring about a completion of the event of revelation of which Scripture is only the precipitating occasion. Interpretation is not clarification or completion, but recognition, assent to the inherent clarity and adequacy of the prophetic and apostolic witness which bears to us the voice of the church’s Lord.

The effect of this is clearly a rather drastic revision of some habitual ways of thinking of the church’s relation to the Word. The Word is not in the church but

33 The word is Barth’s, from The Theology of the Reformed Confessions, pp. 48–49, 56.

announced to the church through Holy Scripture. The church is therefore not first and foremost a speaking but a hearing community. John the seer says that he turned to the voice that was speaking to him (Rev. 1.12); and there are few more succinct statements of the primary dynamic of the Christian assembly. The church is that turning. And, further, in making that movement, in fear and trembling, falling at the feet of the son of man, the church receives its appointment to a specific task: it is summoned to speech.

But what is the character of its speech? If Jesus Christ is the prophet of his own presence through the texts of the canon, then the speech of the church is an indication or attestation of what he himself says. The church's speech is a second, not a first, move, a responsive act whose aim is achieved when it draws attention, not to what it says itself, but to what it has heard. In concrete terms, this means that the primary public language of the church is the exegesis of Holy Scripture. Exegesis is the attempt to listen to the voice of the son of man who 'walks among the seven golden lampstands'; to hear the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword' (Rev. 2.1, 12). Christian exegesis of Scripture is neither textual archaeology or hermeneutical revitalization, because the canon is not a lumber-room of obscure historical data or religious meaning which needs to be unearthed by exegetical or interpretative skill. Both these approaches make the mistake of naturalizing Scripture by extracting it from its place in the communicative economy of Christ and Spirit. Christian exegesis is, properly, listening to the address of Christ in his prophets and apostles, and trying to indicate what has been heard of him through their testimonies. '[A] holy exposition doth give a setting out to the word of God, and bringeth forth much fruit to the Godly hearer,' says Bullinger in the Decades.34 His term ‘setting out’ catches exactly the way in which the church’s public speech, rooted in its attention to the scriptural declaration, is an attestation of what has been spoken to the communion of saints. To 'set out' the Word is not to attempt to extend, enlighten or otherwise improve upon what has been said, as if it required to be made more manifest by some ingenuity on the church’s part. Rather, it is simply to let the Word stand as what it is, and therefore to be placed beneath its governance.

My suggestion, therefore, is that as the visible community of the Word the church will be characterized in all its speaking by deference to Holy Scripture. Of that deference, the primary expression is the church’s act of reading so that it may bear testimony to what has been announced. Deferential reading of the Word – listening to and ‘setting out’ the words of Jesus Christ’s apostles and prophets – is a paradigmatic instance of the church’s activity as a community of attestation. This deference, it ought to be added, is not simply secured by a doctrine of scriptural authority. Such a doctrine is necessary; but it cannot be expected to bear the whole

weight of the church's life in the Word of God. The church will demonstrate that it is a community of the Word not simply by formal affirmations about the nature of Holy Scripture, important though they are, but by setting itself beneath Holy Scripture as the law by which its mind and actions are ruled. The church's relation to Scripture cannot be settled once and for all by a theology of biblical authority and inspiration – and if we think that it can be so settled, we run the risk of arresting that movement in which the church has its being: that ceaseless turn to the voice of its Lord, and that echoing act of witness.

**In Place of a Conclusion**

1. Evangelical Christians need an ecclesiology, and the ecclesiology they need is an evangelical ecclesiology, for the gospel is ecclesial. But an ecclesiology has to be a good deal more than a set of inchoate instincts which grab hold of whatever bits of doctrine float in their direction. A properly evangelical ecclesiology has to take its place within the scope of doctrinal affirmations which spell out the Christian confession of God, Christ, the Spirit, election, reconciliation, sanctification, and the rest. Evangelical Christianity is nowadays sometimes tempted to think that the remedy for its instinctive ecclesiological indifference or minimalism is to move upmarket. The evangelical tradition has latterly been alarmingly undiscriminating – in its very open attitude to socially immanent theories of atonement, for example, or in its enthusiasm for the concept of ‘relationality’ as a theological panacea. But the evangelical tradition surely has more to offer to catholic Christianity than a soft-focus version of the contemporary ecclesiological consensus. Is it too much to hope that the evangelical tradition will dig a little deeper into the theology of grace? Barth warned Roman Catholics around the time of Vatican II to beware lest they became liberal Protestants; should we perhaps worry lest evangelicals become catholicized Protestants who make the mistake of thinking that the only ecclesiological improvement upon individualism and ‘soul liberty’ is a rather ill-digested theology of the *totus Christus*?

2. In the present unreconciled state of the churches, evangelicals need to offer what they have received from their own traditions to the wider fellowship of the saints. They must do so without stridency or anxiety, with humble confidence and generosity, with attentiveness and a teachable bearing towards those from whom they find themselves separated by reason of confession. But these things can only happen if evangelicals take the time to reacquaint themselves with the deep exegetical and dogmatic foundations of the traditions to which they belong; and, more important still, they can only happen if evangelicals demonstrate the supreme ecumenical virtue of acknowledging that we also need to change. This, at least, the churches in the Reformation tradition ought to know: *ecclesia reformanda, quia reformata.*

3. Ecclesiology is secondary; the life of the fellowship of the saints comes first, because it is in that fellowship that we keep company with God. The renewal of the fellowship of the church is not a matter for dogmatics, but for the invocation of the church’s God. ‘Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.’

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to identify distinctively Christian values that the Church might bring to public discussions of health care today. It does this by looking carefully at the Synoptic healing stories, identifying in the process four dominant virtues: compassion, care, faith and humility. It argues that together these virtues form an ideal typology that can be used to complement, deepen and sometimes challenge, but not simply replace, the prevalent values current within much health-care ethics today.

The death earlier this year (2004) of Gordon Dunstan aged eighty-six is an important reminder of the key role of the Church in the development of health-care ethics. Through theologians such as Paul Ramsey and William F. May in the United States, and Bob Lambourne and Gordon Dunstan in Britain, as well as through church leaders, notably John Habgood and Ted Shotter, and hospital chaplains like Norman Autton, the Church a generation ago had a crucial public role in an ethical area that now appears rather more secularized. Even today, despite this appearance, theologians and church leaders are regularly incorporated into national committees concerned with different aspects of health-care ethics (as are hospital chaplains at a more local level). The Church may no longer be so important to public health-care ethics but it still remains intimately connected.

Nonetheless, this connection is increasingly questioned by theologians themselves, not least because of the huge influence of Stanley Hauerwas within Christian ethics. More than anyone else he has challenged theologians to think more carefully about the distinctively Christian resources that we bring to ethical issues. He has also raised doubts about those of us who still regard these resources as being compatible with more secular forms of ethics in the public forum.

Stanley Hauerwas can be at his most persuasive when writing about health-care ethics, for example in his profound book *Suffering Presence* or in *Naming*

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He requires readers to think about issues such as mental health care in ecclesial rather than secular terms. The method he proposes arises from the convictions about the vital connection he made in the early 1980s between social ethics and the Church as a distinctive community:

… any consideration of the truth of Christian convictions cannot be divorced from the kind of community the church is and should be ... my primary interest is to challenge the church to regain a sense of the significance of the polity that derives from convictions peculiar to Christians ... if the church is to serve our liberal society or any society, it is crucial for Christians to regain an appropriate sense of separateness from that society.¹

Later in the same book he also wrote:

The contention and witness of the church is that the story of Jesus provides a flourishing of gifts which other politics cannot know. It does so because Christians have been nourished on the story of a savior who insisted on being nothing else than what he was. By being the son of God he provided us with the confidence that insofar as we become his disciples our particularity and our regard for the particularity of our brothers and sisters in Christ contribute to his Kingdom. Our stories become part of the story of the Kingdom.⁴

Although I have been critical elsewhere³ of Stanley Hauerwas’s emphasis upon the ‘separateness’ and even ‘alienation’ of the Church from secular society that has increasingly dominated his recent writings, I still believe in an ecclesial Christian ethic centred upon the story of Jesus. Where I differ from Stanley Hauerwas in ecclesial terms is in my belief that such an ethic can complement, deepen and sometimes challenge, but not simply replace, a purely secular account of health-care ethics. Where I differ theologically is in my growing conviction that the primary biblical resource for such an ethic is to be located in the Synoptic healing stories rather than in the Pauline corpus. In this article I hope to take this theological conviction a stage further by looking carefully at the explicit or implicit virtues contained in these Synoptic healing stories as a primary resource for health-care ethics today.

The Method Used

Identifying implicit assumptions, beliefs and practices – sometimes at odds with those that are explicitly stated – is germane to social science. Both quantitative and

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² Stanley Hauerwas, Naming the Silences (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).
⁴ Hauerwas, A Community of Character, p. 51.
⁵ See Robin Gill, Churchgoing and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 3.
qualitative methods can be used to achieve this in the modern world, as I attempted to demonstrate at length in *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics*. In the ancient world it is likely to be qualitative methods alone that are appropriate. However, by using such methods effectively it might be possible to analyse the healing stories in the Synoptic Gospels to uncover the virtues implicit within them.

Qualitative methods in social science typically look for regularities and correlations. Hence qualitative research using extended interviews with subjects is often based upon a loosely structured framework (allowing, as far as possible, subjects to express their thoughts on a particular topic using their own words). The interviews are recorded and then transcribed. In turn, the transcriptions can be analysed (often using an appropriate software programme) in order to see which explicit words or phrases – or implicit notions – occur or are combined most regularly within the transcriptions. Qualitative research of this sort lacks the ‘objectivity’ of randomized, stratified quantitative sampling. Yet it gains a depth and specificity that would otherwise not be possible. Individual subjects can be given a real opportunity to express themselves in their own terms and not simply in those of the interviewers.

Empirical research using such qualitative methods often focuses upon details within a recorded interview or written story that might otherwise appear trivial. Social anthropologists and qualitative sociologists are trained to look beyond public explanations, in the belief both that human beings have complex forms of behaviour of which they are only partially aware and that interpersonal communication usually consists of more than verbal expressions. For example, those social scientists who are trained to observe non-verbal body language learn to identify patterns of social communication among human subjects who are themselves largely unconscious of these patterns. Seemingly trivial gestures, body movements, eye contact and non-verbal noises are used as evidence by these social scientists of complex forms of social communication. Indeed, among those people with Asperger’s syndrome it is often these seemingly trivial gestures, movements and noises that are either absent in their social interactions or are present but in forms that are unfamiliar to most other people. So although some of those with this syndrome may be highly skilled in verbal logic, other people may be confused by the asymmetry between their verbal and non-verbal skills of communication. They literally ‘send out mixed messages’.

If the healing stories within the texts of the earliest Gospel traditions are inspected in this way, what patterns of reported behaviour – or, more specifically, what values or virtues – recur? Caution is needed at this point. Vernon Robbins reminds the incautious that ‘there is not simply a text; texts were produced by authors and they are meaningless without readers. There are not simply readers; readers are meaningless without texts to read and authors who write texts. All three presuppose historical, social, cultural and ideological relations among people and

the texts they write and read." In the light of the considerable advances of biblical interpretation over the last two decades it would be naïve to claim that any focus upon particular biblical texts – let alone my own – is free from an element of ‘reader response’. My own focus here is quite explicit – namely a concern for healing within the context of modern health care. Any focus of this sort inevitably involves some ‘historical, social, cultural and ideological relation’ between myself and the Synoptic texts.

Nonetheless, some approximate way of counting might help to identify the most prevalent patterns that are actually present within these texts whether or not it is me that is involved in the study of them. It would be a mistake to attempt to turn this into a formal, quantitative exercise. The very nature of the Synoptic Gospels precludes this, since they contain so much duplicate material as well as variant textual readings. In any case it is sometimes a matter of personal judgment whether or not a particular virtue is thought to be implicit within a particular story. At most, any system of counting is a means of identifying rough prevalence. With this in mind, the system used here will give a full weighting to a primary occurrence in one of the Synoptic sources and just half a weighting for a parallel occurrence (judging the latter to be not without significance yet not as significant as the former).

**Prevalent Features**

Passionate emotion is a very strong feature of the Synoptic healing stories. This takes several forms: sometimes it is Jesus being portrayed as angry; sometimes it is the healing being set in a situation of sharp confrontation; and sometimes it is the crowd which is portrayed as being afraid or amazed. In all of these forms taken together (and they do often occur together), passionate emotion has a very high rating of approximately eighteen. Crowd amazement/fear occurs usually at the end of a number of stories in Mark: the man in the synagogue (1.27), the paralytic (2.12), the Gadarene demoniac (5.15), Jairus’ daughter (5.42) and the deaf mute (7.37). Matthew and/or Luke have parallels with all of these stories and in addition share a further story of the blind/dumb demoniac (Matt. 12.23/Luke 11.14). Matthew also has a crowd ‘wondering’ (15.31) and Luke has a crowd afraid (after the raising of the widow of Nairn’s son in 7.16). Sharp controversy also features in several healing stories: sometimes because the healing is on a sabbath – the man with the withered hand (Mark 3.1–6/Matt. 12.9–14/Luke 6.6–11) and in Luke’s stories of the woman with an eighteen-year infirmity (13.10–21) and the man with dropsy (14.1–6); on another occasion the sharp controversy involves supposed healing by Beelzebub

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(Matt. 12.22–32/Luke 11.14–20); and on another it is about the power to forgive sins (Mark 2.3–12/Matt. 9.2–8/Luke 5.18–26). Jesus himself variously shows anger or compassion, according to differing texts, towards the leper in Mark (1.43), anger towards the Pharisees in the story of the man with the withered hand (3.5), and in Matthew the two blind men are told ‘sternly’ by Jesus to tell no one (9.30).

Faith (with a weighting of approximately fifteen) is another very strong feature in the Synoptic healing stories. The phrase ‘your faith has made you well’, said by Jesus directly to the one who has just been healed, is addressed in all three Gospels to the woman with a haemorrhage (Mark 5.34/Matt. 9.22/Luke 8.48), in Mark and Luke to blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.52/Luke 18.42) and in Luke alone to one of the ten lepers (17.19). In a Matthew story (9.28), Jesus asks the two blind men ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this’ before healing them, whereas in Mark’s story of the epileptic boy (9.24) it is the father who declares ‘I believe, help my unbelief’ before his son is healed. In a number of other healing stories Jesus recognizes the faith of those close to the one who was to be healed: the paralytic man in all three Gospels (Mark 2.5/Matt. 9.2/Luke 5.20), the centurion’s servant in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 8.10/Luke 7.9), and in Matthew’s version of the Markan story of the Canaanite woman (15.28). A lack of faith on the part of the would-be healer is given as the reason in all three Gospels for the inability of the disciples to heal the epileptic boy (Mark 9.19/Matt. 17.17/Luke 9.41) and a lack of faith by others is associated in Mark and Matthew with Jesus’ inability to heal many in his home country (Mark 6.5–6/Matt. 13.58).

Mercy or compassion features in several forms within the Synoptic healing stories (with a weighting of at least fourteen). The most common of these is for a story to begin with a plea to Jesus for mercy from the ill or their relatives. This form can be found explicitly in Mark’s story of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.47/Luke 18.37); in both of Matthew’s parallel stories of two blind men (9.27 and 20.30); in Luke’s story of the ten lepers (17.13); in Matthew’s versions of the Canaanite/Syro-Phoenician woman (15.22) and the epileptic boy (17.15). An initial plea for mercy may also be present implicitly in those stories which involve people begging Jesus and/or prostrating themselves before him asking for a healing: in all three Gospels the leper (Mark 1.40/Matt. 8.2/Luke 5.11) and Jairus (Mark 5.22–23/Matt. 9.18/Luke 8.41), and in Mark the Syro-Phoenician woman (7.26) and the blind man at Bethsaida (8.22). In Mark’s original story of the epileptic, the boy’s father asks Jesus not for ‘mercy’ but for ‘pity’ or ‘compassion’ (9.22) – using the word splagknistheis rather than eleeson. In a number of stories it is compassion that is explicitly attributed to Jesus himself: in Luke’s story of the widow at Nain (7.13); in two of Matthew’s accounts of crowds associated with healing (9.36 and 14.14); and in some texts of Mark’s story of the leper (1.41). In Matthew’s story of the two blind men at Jericho (20.29–34), ‘mercy’ and ‘compassion’ uniquely are both used: the blind men cry to Jesus ‘Have mercy on us’ and again ‘Lord, have mercy on us’ and

Jesus responds in ‘compassion’, touching their eyes. In a context of care, rather than healing as such, ‘compassion’ is attributed to Jesus as a reason for the feeding of the four thousand in both Mark and Matthew (Mark 8.2/Matt. 15.32) and the feeding of the five thousand in Mark (6.34). Compassion also features at pivotal points in Luke’s parables of the Good Samaritan (10.33) and Prodigal Son (15.20) and in Matthew’s parable of the Unmerciful Servant (18.27).

Another prevalent feature of the healing stories (with an overall weighting of at least twelve) involves touching. Jesus touching the person to be healed is a very strong feature indeed. In Mark alone Jesus touches Peter’s mother-in-law (1.31), the leper (1.41), Jairus’ daughter (5.41), some sick people (6.5), the deaf-mute (7.33), the blind man (8.23) and the epileptic boy (9.27). Two of these stories have parallels in Matthew and Luke and a further one in Matthew but not Luke. In addition, Luke has two separate stories involving Jesus touching – the bier of the widow’s son (7.14) and the woman with an eighteen-year infirmity (13.13) – and Matthew tells of Jesus touching two blind men (9.29). In addition to all of these reports of touching there are two other stories – the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5.27/Matt. 9.20/Luke 8.44) and the crowd at Gennesaret (Mark 6.56/Matt. 14.36) – in which the people to be healed touch Jesus’ garments.

A related feature, namely uncleanness, is explicitly linked to two of these stories – the leper, found in all three Gospels, and the epileptic boy, in Mark alone – and may be implicitly present in several more of the stories. The overall prevalence weighting for uncleanness/cleansing is almost as high as for touching. So in Mark it also features in the man in synagogue (1.23, 27), the crowd (3.11), the Gadarene demoniac (5.2, 13) and the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter (7.25). Luke has parallels with the first three of these and an additional story featuring cleansing – the ten lepers (17.14). Matthew also has Jesus’ command to the twelve disciples to ‘cleanse lepers’ (10.8).

A feature of healing stories that has attracted much scholarly attention during the last century is reticence or restraint (with a weighting of around ten). Jesus gives a command at the end of several stories that no one should be told: in Mark and Luke he commands cast-out demons not to speak (Mark 1.34/Luke 4.41); in all three Gospels (Mark 1.44/Matt. 8.4/Luke 5.14) he tells the leper to tell no one (with Mark including the adverb ‘sternly’); in Mark he orders unclean spirits not to make him known and in the parallel Matthew story he gives the same order to those that have been healed (Mark 3.12/Matt. 12.16); in Mark and Luke he tells Jairus and his family to tell no one after his daughter has been healed (Mark 5.43/Luke 8.56); in Mark Jesus charges people more than once to tell no one after the healing of the deaf mute (7.36) and tells the blind man ‘Do not even enter the village’ after his healing (8.26); and in Matthew Jesus ‘sternly’ charges the two blind men ‘See that no one knows it’ (9.30). This feature of reticence or restraint is not wholly consistent. For instance, Jesus tells unclean spirits in Mark and Luke to be

Although these are all frequent within the Synoptic healing stories, there are other features that occur but less often. Ironically such minority features have sometimes been given particular attention within biblical commentaries. For example, only in Matthew and Luke is a direct link made between healing and the Kingdom of God (Matt. 12.28/Luke 11.20) and even within these two Gospels this link is most unusual. Again, an explicit identification of healing as a ‘sign’ is a feature of John (4.54) rather than the Synoptic Gospels. Yet considerable attention has been given to both of these features in discussions of healing stories within the Synoptic Gospels. Another feature that has received considerable attention is the use of Aramaic commands at the very moment of healing. For example, it encouraged early form-critics to identify this as a magical technique similar to other ancient miracle stories. It is indeed a feature of two of Mark’s stories (5.41; 7.34), but it does not occur in parallels or elsewhere in the Synoptic healing stories and may be explained simply as being appropriate to their original context (as in 3.17; 7.11; 14.36; 15.22, 34). Yet in Mark there a number of other links that are occasionally made: synagogues feature in five of the healing stories (1.23, 39; 3.1; 5.36; 6.2); ‘authority’ is explicit in three stories (1.27; 2.10; 3.15), sin and forgiveness in one (2.5–10), power in another (5.30) and ‘prayer’ in yet another (9.29). It certainly must not be assumed that these less frequent features are unimportant. However, a qualitative approach to evidence does carry an a priori assumption that if features regularly and spontaneously recur within interviews or written stories, then they may well be an indication of values or commitments that might otherwise be overlooked. On this basis particular attention needs to be given to those six features – passionate emotion, faith, mercy/compassion, touching, uncleanness and reticence/restraint – that occur most often in the Synoptic healing stories.

### An ‘Ideal’ Typology

So far these six features have been discussed in the order of their rough prevalence. Given the crude way that their different weightings have been measured, this is hardly satisfactory. All that has been established up to this point is that it is these features – rather than a link with the Kingdom of God, signs, Aramaic commands, synagogues, authority, sin/forgiveness, power or prayer – which are the most

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characteristic features of the Synoptic healing stories. It might, though, be more logical to order these most characteristic features in terms of their sequence actually within healing stories. On this basis, mercy/compassion typically occur at the beginning of stories, faith soon after the healing, and reticence/restraint at the end. The remaining features – passionate emotion, touching and uncleanness – tend to cluster in association in the middle of healing stories. An overall four-fold pattern begins to emerge: an initial plea for mercy/compassion, followed by passionate emotion/unclean touching – *then the healing itself* – followed by a recognition of faith, and concluding with a command for restraint.

In sociological terms this is an ‘ideal’ typology (or, in Wittgenstein’s philosophical terms, ‘family resemblance’): it depicts the characteristic pattern of a Synoptic healing but not the actual pattern of any particular story. Only in the combined stories of the healing of Jairus’ daughter and the woman with a haemorrhage can all four elements be found: the prostrate opening plea of Jairus/the weeping and wailing in Jairus’ house, the touching of the daughter by Jesus and the unclean touching of Jesus by the woman/the faith of the woman/and the command to Jairus and his family to tell no one. All of the Synoptic stories contain at least one (and usually more) of the four, but none contains them all.

**Compassion**

A plea for mercy/compassion typically initiates a healing story. Hugh Melinsky states bluntly and inaccurately:

> To attempt to understand the healing miracles in terms of nineteenth-century philanthropy is to try measuring a patient’s temperature with a slide-rule. In fact, compassion for a sick person is never in the gospels a primary motive for Jesus’ healing.  

He forgets, of course, Matthew’s accounts of Jesus’ response to crowds seeking healing (9.36 and 14.14), his story of the two blind men (20.34) and Luke’s story of the widow at Nain (7.13) (Melinsky, in line with Vincent Taylor, discounts the variant reading in Mark 1.41.) However, even biblical commentators have been apt to play down the role of compassion in the Synoptic healing stories. So, all that A. H. M’Neile comments on Matt. 20.34 is: ‘An expression of emotion in Mt, absent from Mark, is unusual’, and all that C. F. Evans comments on Luke 7.13 is: ‘Only

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here and Matt. 20.34 as the motive for performing a miracle.'\textsuperscript{10} Given the combined evidence within the earliest Gospel traditions just rehearsed – including explicit and implicit pleas for mercy alongside direct depictions of Jesus' compassion – this does seem to be too narrow an interpretation. Even in the later traditions of healing stories to be found in John and Acts, compassion does not seem to absent: in John, Jesus responds to the official who begs him to come down and heal his son (4.47) and is reported at the outset of the Lazarus story to ‘love’ Martha, Mary and Lazarus (11.5), and, in Acts, the first healing story is depicted by Peter as ‘a good deed’ (4.9).

In complete contrast to these commentators, Oliver Davies’s \textit{A Theology of Compassion} makes a sustained case for regarding compassion as the primary Christian virtue. His concern is with theology as a whole rather than with the specific area of healing. Nevertheless, what he writes can easily be applied to the latter. He argues that compassion rather than love best depicts the Christian life, since love ‘embraces concepts and phenomena that are both wholly distinct and easily confused’ (such as \textit{agape} and \textit{eros}):

\begin{quote}
Compassion, on the other hand, presents a complex but more easily identifiable structure, which in Martha Nussbaum’s analysis entails a combination of cognitive, affective and volitional elements. In compassion we see another’s distress (cognition), we feel moved by it (affectively) and we actively seek to remedy it (volition).
\end{quote}

This combination of cognitive, affective and volitional elements is exactly what characterizes mercy/compassion in the Synoptic healing stories. At the outset Jesus is made aware of those in serious need explicitly or implicitly begging him for mercy (cognition). He responds by stopping, listening, talking and showing anger/compassion (affectively). He then acts, touching even those who are regarded as ritually unclean, cleansing and healing them (volition). Empathy can remain largely at the cognitive level and sympathy at the affective level. However, compassion, properly understood, involves cognitive, affective and volitional elements. The one who is properly compassionate seeks, wherever possible, to remedy another’s distress. Davies recognizes, of course, that for ordinary mortals there is not always a remedy:

\begin{quote}
That man or woman who understands another’s suffering and is affected by it, while recognising that action on behalf of that person is simply not possible (as in the case of terminal illness for instance), can be said to be compassionate, since it is simply practical constraints which prevent the expression of the will to alleviate suffering.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Oliver Davies, \textit{A Theology of Compassion} (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 17–18.
\textsuperscript{12} Davies, \textit{A Theology of Compassion}, p. 18.
The Synoptic Gospel writers would have recognized no such practical constraints confronting Jesus. However, in the more mundane context of today’s health-care ethics it is crucial. Volition is an essential element of compassion even when it is finally thwarted by human limitations.

Another helpful point that Oliver Davies makes is that compassion is not an exclusively Judaeo-Christian concept. It is both an essential civil virtue and a requirement of many religious traditions:

> Compassion stands at the far end of a continuum of altruistic actions, which begins in the domain of everyday experience. Indeed, a good deal of human behaviour can only be explained by reference to an altruism which is not the refined calculation of self-interest. The principle of self-denying or kenotic love, of which compassion is a particularly radical manifestation, appears to touch all levels of human existence and, indeed, to make harmonious existence possible. Without such a principle of self-emptying for the sake of the other, enacted in some degree by a myriad of people in countless different ways, most human societies could not keep at bay the violent and selfish tendencies of the human spirit … Despite all the ambiguities of human motivation and understanding, and the social, cultural and psychological complexities of human interaction, such acts of exceptional self-giving love appear to many to represent a moral ideal and to reflect in radical form a principle of altruism without which social civilization as such would founder. It is also significant in this respect that the major world religions combine in laying a particular stress upon the place of compassion in the hierarchy of spiritual values.\(^\text{13}\)

In a footnote at the end of this paragraph he refers specifically to the concept of *karunā* in Buddhism, ‘humaneness’ in the Confucian tradition, and *rahmah* in Islam.\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, even a superficial reading of the Qu’ran soon confirms the centrality of compassion within Islam. Every *sura* (or chapter) but one begins with the invocation ‘In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’. There are frequent reminders to the faithful in the Qu’ran that they should in turn be compassionate to the poor, the needy and travellers (e.g. XXX.35) and followers of Jesus are commended because ‘We set in the hearts of those who followed him tenderness and mercy’ (LVII.25).\(^\text{15}\)

I believe that compassion – in the sense in which Oliver Davies and Martha Nussbaum use the term – is an essential but sometimes neglected virtue within modern health care.

\(^{13}\) Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, pp. 20–21.


Care

After compassion in the Synoptic healing stories comes a cluster of actions and attitudes which collectively, and in the context of health today, might most appropriately be termed ‘care’. This term embraces actions as well as attitudes in that, properly understood, it involves both ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ those in need.

This combination of caring for and caring about is apparent in a number of the healing stories, but it is particularly a feature of Mark’s versions of the healing of the leper (1.40–45) and the epileptic boy (9.14–29). Placed so early in Mark’s Gospel, the story of the leper contains a powerful combination of Jesus deliberately touching someone who is deemed to be ritually unclean with deep emotions attributed to Jesus in the course of this healing. As Morna Hooker maintains:

The significance of the story lies in Jesus’ amazing power to heal even this condition. To us, leprosy seems the most loathsome of diseases; to the Jew, it was also the most strident example of uncleanness. Whether or not the so-called leper was suffering from what we should recognize as a contagious disease, he was certainly regarded as contagious: he was not allowed to come into contact with other human beings or with their property and was thus totally cut off from society. In touching this man, Jesus did not simply run the risk of catching leprosy, but he also made himself unclean according to the regulations of the Mosaic Law. Yet the outcome of the story is not that Jesus is made unclean, but that the leper is made clean!16

Unlike the parallel stories in Matthew and Luke, the story in Mark contains three separate words (‘anger’ or ‘compassion’ in verse 41 and ‘stern’ and ‘sent away’ in verse 45) ‘which suggest agitation or strong emotion in Jesus’ part’. Only John’s powerful account of Jesus’ emotions at the centre of the Lazarus story (11.33–38) can rival this. As a result, Hooker argues that ‘it is probable that Mark himself understood Jesus’ anger and emotion as caused by the forces of evil and disease with which he is here in conflict’.17

A combination of anger and touching someone who is unclean is also a strong feature of the story of the epileptic boy. In Mark, Jesus ‘rebuked the unclean spirit’ (9.25) and then took the boy ‘by the hand and lifted him up’ (9.27). However, the story also starts with controversy involving the scribes, as well as the crowd, ‘amazed’ at the outset (9.15). And Jesus, in turn, is angry in this unusually long story for Mark, apparently with the disciples, denouncing them in all three Gospels as ‘O faithless generation’ (9.19).

Caring about those in need properly involves attention to their social and physical context as well as to their immediate cause of concern. An approach to health care based upon what is now termed systems pastoral care involves attention

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to the patient as a person rather than just to his or her particular disease. That is exactly what is denoted by the passionate emotions depicted in the Synoptic healing stories. Sometimes these emotions are directed at the disease itself or at the ‘unclean spirits’. Yet at other times they involve the faithlessness of the disciples or the religious authorities of the time. Even the crowd’s emotions, which more typically come at the end of a healing story (as in Luke 9.43), can be a source of concern to Jesus. The early narrative in Mark is punctuated with crowd-induced difficulties for Jesus: ‘Jesus could no longer openly enter a town’ (1.45); ‘Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed’ (3.7); and he withdrew in a boat ‘lest they should crush him; for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him’ (3.9–10).

**Faith**

The third feature in the healing stories – faith – is multi-layered as well, both within the Synoptic Gospels and (implicitly) within modern health care. At first sight the frequent mention of faith within the Synoptic stories might seem to be the least relevant of the four features to a modern pluralistic society. However, I believe that, properly understood again, it remains a very important, albeit neglected, feature of health care and that the latter is impoverished if the various layers of faith within a healing relationship are ignored.

At the most basic level the ‘faith’ required of those to be healed (or their families/friends) in the Synoptic stories appears to be a faithful trust in Jesus as healer. In the later traditions of healing stories in John and Acts, *pistis* is clearly more than this: in a context of healing, people become ‘believers’ (e.g. John 4.53 and Acts 5.14) and *pistis* is explicitly in Jesus or in his name (e.g. John 11.25 and Acts 3.16). Yet, in the Synoptic stories, faith appears more ambiguous and commentators tend to have different ways of interpreting it (doubtless reflecting their own particular theological positions or ‘reader responses’). For example, among those commentators concerned primarily with *pistis* in the healing stories in Mark: for Vincent Taylor it primarily ‘denotes a confident trust in Jesus and in his power to help’; for J. M. Robinson ‘Mark has no single person or act as the object of faith, and no specific credal statement as the content of faith. Rather it is faith in the action recorded in Marcan history’, Christopher D. Marshall, in contrast, considers that Robinson ‘is much too vague, for the object of faith is, in a sense, quite specific: the presence of God’s eschatological power in the person of Jesus’ (but note here

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Marshall’s phrase ‘in a sense’, especially since he has earlier admitted to ‘some ambiguity concerning the intended object of faith’). Among commentators more widely there are also differences: for A. H. M’Neile, *pistis* is ‘not belief in Him as divine, but confidence that He could perform a miracle’; for Davies and Allison it is ‘belief in Jesus and his power as miracle worker’, and for C. F. Evans it is simply ‘confidence in Jesus as the source of power’. Despite these differences there does seem to be widespread agreement that *pistis* here has less to do with confessional belief, let alone intellectual assent (as in Mark 13.21), than with trust/confidence.

It is certainly a feature of several of the Synoptic healing stories that faith is demonstrated by action rather than declared verbally, and it is not always even the one to be healed who actually does this demonstrating. So in the story of the paralytic man in Mark and Luke it seems to have been the determined action of friends which was responsible for Jesus seeing their faith (Mark 2.5/Luke 5.20). Commentators have again differed among themselves about whether or not the paralytic man was included in the faith that Jesus saw. There is obviously no way of telling what the Gospel writers themselves intended here (let alone what happened in reality). In any case in those stories involving someone presumed to be dead her or his faith was clearly not involved. Another instance of determined but silent action, in all three Gospels here, followed by Jesus’ commendation of faith, is the woman with a haemorrhage (or, perhaps more accurately, with ritually unclean vaginal bleeding). In Mark and Matthew, significantly, the silent touching of Jesus’ clothes is preceded by her trust that if this can be done ‘I shall be made well’ (Mark 5.28/Matt. 9.21).

In a number of stories, faithful trust in Jesus as healer takes the form of verbal persistence rather than determined silent action. It is this which Jesus appeared to commend in Mark’s story of blind Bartimaeus and in Luke’s parallel story (Mark 10.52/Luke 18.42); in Matthew and Luke’s story of the centurion and his servant (Matt. 8.10/Luke 7.9) – albeit in Luke’s version this is heightened by the centurion using his friends to relay his messages to Jesus; and in Matthew’s version of the Canaanite woman (15.28). In the last two stories the non-Jewish origins of those begging for healing enhances both their persistence and the subsequent commendation of their faith.

There is one particular story where *pistis* understood as ‘faithful trust in Jesus as healer’ becomes explicit, namely Matthew’s story of the two blind men. After their initial persistence:

Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe [pisteute] that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes, saying, ‘According to your faith [pistin] be it done to you.’ And their eyes were opened.25

So the ‘faith’ of the two blind men here seems to have been simply ‘that I am able to do this’. Once they had demonstrated this faith – perhaps both by their initial persistence and by their actual assent to Jesus’ direct question – then healing followed. Is that all that ‘faith’ denotes in the Synoptic healing stories?

Mark’s account of the healing of the epileptic boy might suggest as much until, that is, the mention of prayer in the final verse. There was an initial failure of the disciples to heal the boy; Jesus’ response about a faithless generation; the account of the illness by the boy’s father with a request to have pity ‘if you can do anything’; Jesus’ response about all things being possible ‘to him who believes’; the father’s cry of faith; and then the healing. All of this fits a similar pattern of the ‘faith’ required being simply ‘that I am able to do this’. But then (in Mark alone) the disciples asked Jesus why they had been unable to cast out the boy’s unclean spirit and Jesus responded that, ‘This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer’ (9.29). Faith is now set at a quite different level – that is, as response to God.26 Similarly the story of the paralytic man, in all three Gospels here, concludes with the crowd giving glory to God for the healing. Luke also has the man himself giving glory to God separately (5.25) and Matthew adds significantly that, ‘they glorified God, who had given such authority to men’ (9.7). When it is also recalled how often healing stories in Mark are associated with Jesus’ teaching in a synagogue, it is clear that pistis within the assumptions of the Synoptic healing stories cannot be limited simply to the mundane trust that someone is able to effect a healing. It is that, but it is also clearly more than that: beyond the mundane, faith, properly understood, is response to God.

‘Faith’ in both of these senses – faith as trust in the healer and faith as response to God – needs to be explored further in a modern Christian account of health care. However, there is also a third sense, based upon mutuality, which is present in some of the stories. It seems to be present in Luke’s puzzling story of the ten lepers. C. F. Evans points out the problem with this particular story, ending with the formula ‘your faith has made you well’:

Elsewhere this either effects the healing or accompanies it (cf. 8.48; 18.42 and the parallels in Mark), but here it comes belatedly as a comment on it, and as a somewhat conventional rounding off of the story as a miracle story. For Luke cannot have meant that only the Samaritan was healed by faith, the rest being healed without faith. The sharp point for which the story is told, and which


cannot be made without it, is Jesus’ commendation, not of faith as such, nor of thanksgiving in general, but of the genuine piety of a non-Israelite manifesting itself in gratitude.\textsuperscript{27}

In Luke’s story the other nine lepers apparently did show faith, both in appealing to Jesus for mercy in the first place and then in obeying his command to go and show themselves to the priests. Although they were healed, they did not reciprocate with either praise to God or prostrate gratitude to Jesus (and therefore, so more conservative scholars than Evans tend to argue, they were not actually ‘saved’).\textsuperscript{28} Malina, in contrast, argues that to ‘thank Jesus would mean that the relationship is over’).\textsuperscript{29} There was healing but little mutuality. And in one incident in Mark and Matthew, despite being set in a synagogue, there was apparently such an absence of faith/mutuality that there was little healing at all (Mark 6.5/Matt. 13.58). A full account of faith in the Synoptic healing stories needs to add mutuality to the two other levels of trust in the healer and response to God.

\textbf{Humility}

The fourth and concluding feature of the healing stories is a command for restraint. How is this to be understood in a context of healing? It is surprising how little attention is given to this question in Biblical commentaries. The basic problem seems to be that, despite a widespread agreement that it does not actually work, many commentators still feel obliged to focus upon Wrede’s theory of the so-called Messianic Secret when considering commands to silence within the Synoptic healing stories.

Writing fifty years ago, even then Vincent Taylor admitted that ‘in the form in which Wrede presented it, the theory has been widely rejected, but it continues to exert a great influence … the citadel has caved in; but the flag still flies’.\textsuperscript{30} For Wrede, the commands to silence were an unhistorical device of the early Church to explain why Jesus was not recognized as the Messiah during his lifetime. In Taylor’s revised form, the theory becomes an expression of Jesus’ own conception of Messiahship: knowing himself to be already the Messiah, not least through his healings, he nonetheless commanded silence until his destiny was fulfilled after the Resurrection. Yet even in this modified form this theory hardly fits the exceptions to silence already noted (Mark 5.19/Luke 8.39; Matt. 11.4–5/Luke 7.22; and Luke 13.32).

Another four decades later, Morna Hooker’s discussion of the commands to silence is still dominated by Wrede. She rejects Taylor’s revised theory and agrees with Wrede that the commands are (largely) an unhistorical device. However, she differs from Wrede in her interpretation of the function of this device:

It seems clear the commands to secrecy are largely (though not necessarily entirely) artificial, and that they are a narrative device which has been used by Mark to draw his reader’s attention to the real significance of his story. Secrecy and disclosure are part of a theme which pervades the whole of Mark’s gospel. Throughout the narrative, Jesus acts with supreme authority yet makes no open claims for himself … Yet for those with eyes and ears to see and hear, the meaning is plain … The truth about Jesus is at once hidden from view and yet spelt out on every page of the gospel.\(^{31}\)

It is only at this point in her discussion that Hooker suggests that there may be another plausible explanation of the commands. She regards it as an open question whether Mark created these commands entirely himself or whether some might actually have come from an earlier tradition reflecting Jesus’ own ministry (interestingly, and in sharp contrast, the form-critic Gerd Theissen concluded that ‘probably all the commands to silence in miracle stories are from the tradition’).\(^{32}\) However, on the supposition that some of commands may not be Mark’s own creations, she suggests:

If we believe that Jesus’ actions were characterized by an authority which may fairly be termed ‘messianic’, then it is possible that the so-called messianic secret reflects not simply the tension between Jesus as he was perceived in his lifetime and as he was confessed after the resurrection, but the reluctance of Jesus to make claims about himself: for his message was centred on God and on his Kingdom, not on himself, and if he believed himself to be in any sense the Messiah, the last thing he would do was to claim the title for himself.\(^{33}\)

In other words, reticence may have been an expression of humility.

Once Wrede’s theory is no longer allowed to dominate interpretations of the commands to silence, it is possible that this final suggestion may actually be more fruitful in the specific context of healing. Within this context there are some very obvious and pressing reasons for taking humility seriously. Public and personalized claims to have special powers of healing — although often made by crusading faith healers — are notoriously treacherous. Unless they are to resort to chicanery, mundane faith healers soon find them impossible to fulfil. Even Jesus within the Synoptic Gospels, as just noted, was unable to heal many in a context


\(^{32}\) Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, p.150.

that lacked faith/mutuality. Worse still, such claims soon attract unwelcome crowd expectations, both within the ancient world and, rather oddly, within modern pluralistic societies. Crowd elation, hysteria, recriminations, exaggerated claims and polemical counter-claims are soon made. In short, an absence of restraint in this area soon leads to a serious loss of control.

A pattern of reticence in a context of exaggerated crowd expectations can soon be detected in the Synoptic Gospels. The threatening role of the crowd in the early chapters of Mark has already been noted. Yet it is also a feature of Matthew. In their commentary on Matthew, Davies and Allison appear to agree with Wrede’s conclusion that ‘the idea of the messianic secret no longer has the importance for Matthew that it has for Mark.’

They note, for example, that Matthew drops six of Mark’s commands to silence. However, this conclusion fails to observe the overall pattern of, say, Matthew chs. 8 and 9. Although two of Mark’s commands are dropped here, another is introduced from Matthew’s own source and then placed in a strategic point in the narrative. An overall pattern of reticence, movement and troubled crowds emerges: Jesus comes down from the mountain and great crowds follow him (8.1); Jesus commands the leper to silence (8.4); Jesus enters Capernaum (8.5); Jesus sees great crowds surrounding him and gives orders to get away (8.18); Jesus crosses over by boat to the country of the Gadarenes (8.28); all the city come out to meet Jesus and beg him to leave (8.34); Jesus crosses back by boat (9.1); the crowds see the healing of the paralytic and are afraid (9.8); Jesus puts the crowd outside before raising the ruler’s daughter (9.25); Jesus sternly commands the two blind men to silence (9.30); crowds are moved at the healing of the dumb demoniac (9.33); but the Pharisees make hostile counter-claims (9.34); Jesus goes about cities and villages preaching and healing (9.35); Jesus has compassion for the crowds (9.36).

Reticence following exaggerated crowd expectations might also be detected in the later traditions of healing stories to be found in John and Acts. Earlier commentators tended to make much of the contrast between Mark and these later sources, since the latter lack explicit commands to silence either by Jesus (in John) or by the apostles (in Acts). Both of these later sources also make much about healings as ‘signs’ (e.g. John 4.54 and Acts 4.16: in this Acts context Peter even preaches two sermons on the strength of a single healing). Yet, viewed from the specific perspective of healing: Jesus apparently withdrew because of the crowd after healing a sick man at the pool (John 5.13); he could no longer go ‘about among the Jews’ after raising Lazarus (John 11.54); ‘jealousy’ against the apostles was prompted by crowds being healed by them (Acts 5.12–18); and Peter put all the weeping women outside before healing a woman at Joppa (Acts 9.40).

Of course such reticence in a context of exaggerated crowd expectations can never be absolute. Despite being sternly commanded to silence by Jesus, Matthew recounts that the two blind men ‘went away and spread his fame through all that district’ (9.31). And, away from pressing crowds, the exceptions to commands to silence even in the earliest Gospel traditions no longer appear so odd. It is precisely within a context of exaggerated crowd expectations that the boastful claims of ancient or modern faith healers become so damaging. In contrast, the healer who is really concerned to heal will be much more humble and cautious about public claims.

An emphasis upon humility is certainly not unique to Christianity. Confucianism advises leaders to retain the respect of their people and Buddhism, in some of its forms, encourages abnegation of the self: both have been powerful carriers of humility. Within theistic traditions there is a particular reason for the importance of humility. The Qu’ran, like the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, expresses this frequently: given their belief in God as creator, human beings as creatures should indeed be humble. So, having commanded them to give arms to the needy, the faithful are immediately reminded:

God is He that created you, then He provided for you, then He shall make you dead, and then He shall give you life; is there any of your associates does aught of that? Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above that they associate! 35

Conclusion

Humility, compassion, care and faith are all virtues expressed in many religious traditions. Even though there are distinctive features about each within the Synoptic stories there are also obvious continuities with other religious traditions as well – continuities that fit ill with Stanley Hauerwas’s ‘separated’ or ‘alienated’ Church. These continuities might also encourage an exploration of compatibility with more secular forms of health-care ethics today. What I hope to demonstrate over the next few years is that the Church’s commitment to humility, compassion, care and faith deepens (and sometimes challenges) a secular account of health-care ethics based upon, say, the four secular principles of autonomy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence. For the moment I have expressed this compatibility in summary form as follows:

It is right that compassion should impel medical professionals to care for those in need and that, in turn, care should involve both caring about and caring for those who become patients. A proper understanding of the relationship between medical professionals and their patients also requires them to pay attention to

Sura XXX.39.
non-maleficence, beneficence and the autonomy of these patients – and, in turn, for patients also to respect their autonomy. Faith is involved in some sense in the healing relationship between both parties and, for some, also between them and God. Justice is also an essential consideration in the broader context of health in society at large. And finally humility should restrain both medical professionals from making exaggerated claims and patients from making selfish demands.\textsuperscript{36}

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The Coming of Lutheran Ministries to America

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical and theological foundations of Lutheran doctrines of the ministry of word and sacrament in the Reformation and the Confessional documents and how this inheritance was transposed to the American context. Against this background, it considers the debates on ministerial issues that surrounded the founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the challenges with regard to ministry and mission that face Lutherans in America today as a result of fresh immigration and tensions between the local and the wider church.

Leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ECLA) have been engaged in studies of ministry on multiple fronts in the last decade. Upon completing the merger that formed the ELCA in 1988, American Lutherans immediately set about the task of completing a study of ministry in order to attend to sticky theological and ecclesial issues that the merger committee found irresolvable. It is itself revealing that the separate Lutheran churches could agree to complete their merger without having a clear grasp on the new church’s understanding of ministry, and it demonstrates that, for Lutherans, the ordering of ministry does not constitute the ordering of their church. Nevertheless, the topic was the first order of theological business for the new ELCA. With the ministry study completed in 1993, and the decision made to define ministry as consisting of one office, rather than three, the church was conceivably ready to respond to a number of ecumenical agreements pending in the summer of 1997. The Concordat described the full communion relationship with the Episcopal Church USA, while the Formula of Agreement outlined the full communion arrangement that would commence with three churches in the Reformed tradition. The full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church, USA, however, seemed to stir up the not-quite-settled dust around the question of one, rather than two or three, offices of ministry.

The argumentation and controversy that attended the narrow defeat in 1997 and the narrow victory in 1999 for the ecumenical agreement with the ECUSA (Concordat in 1997, and Called to Common Mission in 1999) did more to reveal
still-active divisions in the newly merged ELCA than it provided guidance on the vexing practical issues of who might conduct an ordination, or the still more perplexing issue related to ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons. American Lutherans in the ELCA have not finished arguing about their understanding of ministry and ordination. Other Lutherans in America, most significantly the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), do not yet accept the ordination of women and have other distinctive emphases in structuring the way that the church itself is governed. My description of the American Lutheran debate is limited to those traditions that have joined together in the ELCA, a church that represents about two-thirds of American Lutheranism.

The process of merger leading up to the formation of the ELCA in 1988 consumed considerable energy, and many decisions relating to ecumenical and cultural developments that the three merging churches may have negotiated more easily on their own have been made in the more murky context of the ongoing political, social and cultural integration of the merging parties. The ecumenical invitations have, however, presented the clearest ‘call’ to Lutherans to do the work of stating our understanding of leadership and authority in our time and place. The full communion relationships that we have entered now ask us to better define who we are, in non-parochial language. Despite the turmoil these controversies have caused our church, the dispute has helped us not only to explain ourselves, but also to better understand ourselves.

I will argue that conversation, argument, and even dispute, build the dialogical relationships of church. Through the actions of speaking and persuading, of listening and reframing, the church gives voice to its experience and hope. This work of the word is a gathering as well as a sending activity; it invites relationships and accompanies fellowship. Ministry provides stewardship for this important spirit-driven work, and the practice of ordination, I will propose, identifies, readies, and undergirds those responsible for these relationships in the body of Christ.

Lutherans understand ordination directly in relationship to the administration of the word and sacrament with the stipulation that a person entering ministry must be duly called. A reading of the confessions, particularly the Augsburg, or Augustana Confession of 1530 states that they did not intend to restructure the church, or reorganize its orders; the interest instead focused on reforming the ways in which people came to faith. Since the reformers concluded that the problem of the church they intended to remedy concerned the way that people came to a saving faith, the remedy given was to concentrate particularly on ordinary people in congregations. As a result, it seems that Lutherans almost exclusively understand the ordained ministry as functioning in a congregational context.

The historical record of Lutheran practice underscores this orientation. Several centuries of development and ongoing reformation have repeatedly focused on ways to deepen and renew Christian life in a congregation. Lutherans see their
ministry and their vocation as local and particular in character, but the clear focus on the work of the congregation unfortunately does not guarantee Lutherans the same sharpness of vision when it comes to seeing the world around the parish.

A rather humdrum example of what I mean occurs at the seminary where I teach, in which the curriculum gives ample opportunity for students to focus on scriptural interpretation, church history, theology and practical ministry, but leaves the very important education in contemporary cultural, political or economic issues to the individual’s free time. A concerted attention to the way that government policies restricting immigration, for instance, may affect our international church relationships is not factored into anyone’s teaching load, but these developments will have a significant bearing on how future ministers will understand the mission of their church body. I am not ready to diagnose our cultural dilemma here, but we seem to have fashioned a curriculum and helped to create a system of professional development in the ELCA that gives us a cadre of ministers who practice efficient pastoral care and who manage a congregation’s program. What is missing is an understanding of ministry in its public and collegial context. Ordination, for Lutherans, may be an event that happens to an individual, but it is also an action that links congregations and a particular person in ministry, a ministry that in turn links them to a wider church, and to God’s mission through Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to conceive of ordination and ministry outside of this relational and mission-oriented process, for ordination does not order a person to God only, but defines also the ways that that person will be held accountable in the church and in the world.

Foundations

In the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, written to articulate and defend the theological foundation for the Reformation movement, the Lutheran understanding of ministry is sparely described in Article V: “To obtain such faith [that is justifying faith, described in the preceding Article IV] God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel.” The structure for ordering such ministry, and the practices and relationships used to install a person into such an office are not spelled out in this primary and

1 Philip Melanchthon wrote the confession to outline the catholicity and orthodoxy of the Lutheran reformers. The confession was presented to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg, 25 June 1530, and subscribed by seven Lutheran Princes and two municipal governments. It remains the foundational confession of the Lutheran communion. Refer to Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), The Book of Concord (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

foundational text. Later in the Confession, in Article XIV, the relationship of this office to the structure of the church is mentioned, but again this is done only briefly. Philip Melanchthon writes that no one should teach, preach/teach publicly (the German and Latin versions have slight differences in the confession) or administer the sacraments without a proper call.

The office of ministry is centered on the functions of preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments. These functions themselves, Lutherans have argued, are the actions by which the church is built, since the word and sacraments provide the medium through which the Holy Spirit can create faith. There would be no church were it not for faith. In other places in the confession these two functions – word preaching and administering the sacrament – again take central place: The famous *satis est* of the seventh article states that *it is enough* for the unity of the church that the word be preached and the sacraments administered in a right way. The passive construction of this seventh article causes varying types of frustration for Lutherans engaged in ecumenical discussions because of the indirect way in which the structures of church governance are either assumed or, according to others, subtly wished away.

Lutheran understandings of the office of ministry assume that the work of ministry is divinely instituted, and do not speculate or advance any new proposals about the inner character of the person of the minister nor demand any particular rituals beyond the recognized need for a public or proper accountability. The functions of preaching and sacramental ministry that are delegated to this office define the role of the minister. He or she is to preach the word that, through the Holy Spirit, brings faith, creates, and recreates the church. He or she is to gather the faithful to hear and receive the word and means of grace.

Further elaboration of the reformers’ explicit understanding of the way that the office of the ministry should be structured can be inferred from Melanchthon’s written response to the Roman Catholic Confutation that was written as a response to the Augsburg Confession. This second round of the reformers’ confession is called the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. The briefly stated understanding of ministry enunciated in Article V of the Augsburg Confession did not elicit a separate confutation from the Roman Catholic readers. That article was presumably acceptable. The understanding of church governance and the language of proper call in Article XIV, however, did elicit a response. Roman Catholic responders indicated that the word ‘proper’ was not clear enough. They insisted instead on the word ‘canonical’, to which Melanchthon wrote his well-known and hotly debated rejoinder that the Lutheran movement desired greatly to retain all the orders and various ranks in the church (he did not explicitly mention the papacy here) if only the bishops would be less cruel. Other than this brief exchange in the *Apology* there were no additional remarks about the office of the ministry. In the context of the worldwide expansion of Lutheran churches, and
ecumenical work of the last half century, however, Lutherans have since that time taken up the topic in earnest.

Since explicit instructions to dictate the structure of a properly reformed ministry did not appear in the Augsburg Confession, the most widely accepted of the confessional documents, different church structures emerged in the various, mostly Northern European, lands that signed on to the confessions. These national churches developed varied forms of ministry that corresponded to the political, economic and social patterns developing in a rapidly modernizing Europe. As immigrants from these lands migrated to North and South America, and Australia and as mission efforts developed, these varied forms were exported abroad.

Melanchthon’s spare treatment of this important topic in the Augsburg Confession has left plenty of room for later elaboration and dispute. Lutherans agree that ministry is necessary to the continuity and legitimacy of the church, but how or in what way it should be structured has been determined in different ways by Lutheran churches around the world. The mutual recognition of ministries among Lutheran churches is an aspect of the ongoing work of building a communion of Lutheran churches, but varying practices in relationship to the ordination of women, or to the development of the deaconate or the episcopate have not in themselves become barriers or bridges to fellowship, with the exception of relationships with the American Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), which is not in fellowship with member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

The lack of specific instructions regarding the structure of ministry in the confessions allowed Lutheran churches around the world to pioneer church structures and forms of ministry adapted to the exigencies of various cultures and times. Theologically, specific structures and practices of ministry belong in the category of ‘adiaphora’ – those things deemed instrumental and not necessary in themselves. Structures of ministry such as the deaconate or the episcopate have not been universally adopted by Lutheran churches, and are not understood in the same way by those churches that have adopted them; at the same time some Lutheran churches such as the ELCA have introduced practices through which their church will gradually maintain a form of the historic episcopate. The Called to Common Mission agreement with the Episcopal Church, USA, adopted by the ELCA in 1999 provides for the installation of all newly elected bishops into the ‘historic episcopate’ through the participation of three bishops who already stand in the tradition, one of them being from the Episcopal Church, USA. The adoption of this agreement was very controversial and narrowly failed to gain a two-thirds majority on the first attempt in 1997, when it was called the Concordat of Agreement. After a team of three Lutheran writers worked on the document it was narrowly passed. There is continuing resistance especially to the provision that all ordinations be performed by bishops and at the 2001 voting assembly the ELCA passed a provision allowing for exceptions to this rule. So far there have only been a handful of these. Much
of the ferocity of the opposition is based on a firm conviction that Lutheranism is best served by a continuing adherence to minimalist, egalitarian structures. The Lutheran concept *adiaphora*, which was translated into English as ‘indifferent’, connotes a negative meaning to the term, which supports their argument that adding unnecessary things will only impede the work of the church. Those who have argued for the adoption of new practices have instead understood the term *adiaphora* in a more permissive way, in the sense of the German translation of the term – *mittelting* – or the Swedish *medelting* – which underscores the more fluid character of the Greek word. Ministry structures are *adiaphora* in that they function not as an end in themselves but in an instrumental way. Ministry becomes a vehicle for something else, a means to an end. This word would then precisely fit the Lutheran understanding of ministry and provide a control for judging all forms and structures – they should be accepted or rejected insofar as they function as a vehicle for the Gospel and the means of grace.

The testing of traditions and structures that is part and parcel of the argument and debate in contemporary Lutheranism in the United States has been an ongoing and persistent feature of Lutheran church history. Various forms of ministry emerged in the countries where Lutheran teachings took hold, and the emergent organization – whether episcopally ordered or presbyteral – were adaptations to specific legal and political and cultural contexts. The reformation movement that gave rise to a rethinking and reorganization of ecclesial structures was also word-centered, in that any change had to be thought out and determined through process of argumentation and persuasion, in which the practical questions of message and audience, and of congregational involvement were necessarily involved. It is theologically important to recognize that the process of forming Lutheran churches and the structures of ministry and leadership that would guide them were forged in a confessional, persuasive, participatory and argumentative context. This does not mean that Lutheran leaders, political or ecclesiastical, have not resorted at times to coercive processes through which orders and practices have been imposed or enacted arbitrarily. The Lutheran movement has not proceeded through consensual means only, but has struggled with power and authority as any other human institution. Nevertheless, and I think the historical record will also reveal this, there is a common understanding among Lutherans that the way forward with any idea or message is to tell it, to argue it, to make the case, and to let the community discern, ultimately, the Gospel in that word.

**The American Context**

Perhaps the process of message, reception and adaptation was nowhere more visible than in the development of Lutheranism in America. The time of the Reformation was also the time of the exploration and European expansion into what was
then called the New World. Luther’s own life span and the time of the Counter-
reformation, and the adaptation of the reformation movement in Northern Europe
was part and parcel of a widespread competitive national and mercantile expansion.
Portugal, Italy and Spain competed with France, England and the Netherlands in
organizing vast overseas enterprises. The religious dimensions of this expansion
touch on our subject too.

Many of the early settlers in America came for religious reasons. Dissenting
groups had the opportunity to establish their own religiously intolerant domains.
But there was too much land to settle, and dissenters, who usually had their own
supply of ministers, soon became minor segments of a much more eclectic mix of
settlers. Ordinary farmers, merchants and craftspeople usually required some kind
of religious ministry, but these settlers had a much harder time finding appropriate
ministers. Lutherans provided a ready supply of settlers to the large territory of
William Penn, and began arriving on the scene late in the seventeenth century. In
Philadelphia, where many settled, several decades passed before a settled ministry
emerged for the many Germans living there. Nearby, in Delaware and along the
Chesapeake there was a rather small Swedish colony, with alternatively three or four
Swedish priests in place, but there were few German ministers, and most of these
had loose connections to any kind of legitimizing authority – they were wont to call
each other pretenders so it is hard to know how these individual pastors could have
built something given their fractious relations with each other.

The need for ministers, however, became so great that congregations, or more
properly groups of German settlers, realized that they couldn’t wait for a pastor to
perhaps arrive from one of the universities in Germany. Given the great distances
and the scattered nature of settlement in America, it was difficult to recruit able
candidates even where there was some interest in Germany. It was eventually
necessary to generate suitable candidates for ministry from among the settlers
themselves. The first ordination of a Lutheran pastor in America took place on 25
November 1703, and it was conducted by three priests from the Swedish Delaware
settlement who together ordained a German, Justus Falckner, so that he could
provide ministry to German settlers in Pennsylvania. The certificate, or prästbrev,
attested that Justus Falckner was a properly ordained minister of the Gospel.

The original document contains fold markings indicating that Falckner carried
this certificate, or prästbrev, on his person as a legitimating credential. The ample
text contained an argument for ordination and for the office of ministry and did a
necessary work of making a theological and scriptural argument for the ordained
ministry. The signs of pocket wear suggest that Falckner had to present his
credentials in many different places as he ministered to widely scattered groups of
new American settlers who evidently did not automatically accept the authority of
a preacher. Numerous stories from colonial settlements about unruly, undisciplined
and con-artist priests who foisted themselves on unsuspecting congregations
explain Falckner’s prudence. A potential congregation would have had to be convinced of their need for a duly ordained person by a persuasive argument or at least an important-looking document. Latin provided the ‘lingua ecclesia’ that could address a varied population of Dutch, Swedish, German and English-speaking Lutherans.

The text of the certificate proclaims that the office of ministry is based on the word, and is necessary for the preservation of faith. The argument connects ministry with the gift of the word with creation: ‘God Himself, the Establisher and Preserver of holy ministry, first discharged the office [munere] of preaching in Paradise and raised the first parents, deceived by the devil in disguise, for the hope of salvation by the promised seed of the woman, that he would tread upon the head of the serpent.’ Right from the beginning, the certificate introduces the possibility of deception, a problem that presents itself again at the end of the certificate when mention is made of all those who have entered the office of preacher under false pretenses. Throughout the text of this certificate, however, there is the repeated assurance that even in a wilderness, or time of uncertainty, God provided for the proper office of ministry: ‘Nor is there any doubt that Adam had instructed his children as to how they ought to preserve their faith in the promised seed. Before and after the flood, there existed lamps of the restored church and heralds of righteousness, Noah, Abraham, and other ministers of the Divine Word.’ The certificate traces salvation history through Moses, and the exemplary life of the levitical priests and through to the time of the New Covenant, when, ‘by His own ordination God distinguished between the teachers and those who heard, and guarded his order against the rank of the devil and the malice of the world.’ Again, the dangers to proper ministry present themselves, yet God has always provided the word, even in wilderness settings, and so also here in America.

Significantly, the argument does not align the ministry with the apostolic witness alone, or derive its authority and sanction from it succession from the original disciples. Instead it is the divine office of preaching the word, an office shared with the patriarchs and prophets that is now bequeathed via the actions of the Swedish priests, to one, a German, Justus Falckner. The document also warns readers against accepting just anyone who shows up and claims ministerial status. There are pretenders loose in the land, and any who claim this office for themselves, without the attestation of other clergy, should not be trusted.

The collegial context within which ministry is generated and recognized created a recognizable history for Lutherans churches and ministry in America.

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3 All citations that follow in this paragraph are from the Falckner Ordination certificate, housed in the archives of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, translated by Mimi Ruth, with the assistance of Maria Erling and Timothy Wengert. The full text and the translation are in an appendix.
Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, a minister who came to the colonies from Halle, near Wittenberg in Germany, in the middle of the eighteenth century, is widely recognized for his work in organizing the first ministerium and providing for a standard worship service and the regular organization of parishes. His career spanned the important transition years of revolution and independence when established church structures in some of the colonies in America were dismantled. His organizing ability and ecclesial leadership was so well known, apparently, that he was approached by congregations from other traditions. At one point after the American Revolution, when relations between American Episcopalians and the Church of England were understandably strained, the Lutheran Pennsylvania ministerium was asked to ordain an Episcopal candidate.

Muhlenberg’s response to the request suggested first that the congregation temporarily authorize a ministry among them that would provide for the preaching of the word while they waited for an episcopally ordained priest. His suggestion that the congregation could itself authorize a form of ministry did not suit the Episcopal congregation’s understandings of the office. After four years, with some hesitation, the ministerium agreed to examine and ordain John Wade for ministry in an Episcopal congregation. In this case, it is important to note, the congregation was the party that resisted taking the authority to ‘call’ its own pastor, preferring instead to rely also on the judgment of the gathered ministers. There are interesting dimensions to this story, more revealing of colonial transitions than of the understanding of ministry perhaps, but the more illuminating point is the pragmatic, deliberative process that Muhlenberg and the Pennsylvania ministerium used in order to determine their course of action. They took the time to deliberate over the course of four meetings on whether or not they had the authority to ordain a person for another tradition, and how they might determine what kind of theological examination to administer to the candidate.

Throughout the history of Lutheran adaptation in America, the leaders who emerge and the decisions they make depend on this process of mutual deliberation, of persuasion and argument. I have traced a couple of examples relating to ordination and leadership from the early colonial period of American Lutheran history. The process of decision-making, even at that time, involved significant adjustments to their inherited Lutheran tradition. America had no Lutheran theological faculties at universities that could weigh in on the important theological developments that occurred within the young churches. Pietism, a movement focusing on individual reformation and spiritual renewal particularly among the laity, was the form of Lutheran practice that made the largest impact on the developing American church.

4 Muhlenberg’s diary entry on 11 June 1783 stated that he considered the situation to be an emergency and recommended the action. John Wade was examined then by the ministerium and ordained in August 1783. Cited in James Pragman, Traditions in Ministry (St Louis: Concordia, 1983), p. 118.
It was an activist movement, and it was portable. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ gained a renewed emphasis through the writings of Pietist authors such as Philip Jakob Spener, and the voluntary nature of American church life allowed for the active participation of lay Christians, who provided financial support and local leadership in the work of building up the church. The development of democratic forms of church life characterized the experience of every new group of American Lutherans as they arrived, built congregations, trained and ordained their leaders, established seminaries and colleges, and determined the shape and focus of their collective work.

Social transformations during the nineteenth century introduced an entirely new agenda to Lutheran churches on the Continent, in America, and eventually around the world. Alongside the ongoing migrations of peoples from rural settings to cities, and to other lands, came significant disruptions to churchly sensibilities and expectations. In Scandinavia a neo-pietist renewal among laypeople awakened many to a powerful sense of an individual Christian calling even as they contemplated leaving home and becoming landholders or businessmen in far-away America. Communicating across the ocean, immigrants, in their letters home, encouraged cousins and nieces to follow them not only to a new land but also to a new social reality: ‘Don’t listen to the parish priest who is warning you against America’, one wrote. ‘He is just worried about losing his servants. In America everyone can be called a Mr.’

In developing their own understanding of ministry, immigrant church bodies in America assumed that leadership would center on ordained pastors, but established structures in which laypeople would have significant input. At early meetings of ministers and at the conference gatherings of congregations, considerable time was spent debating the propriety of lay preaching, and discussing the relative authority of congregations and synods in the calling of pastors.

These debates about the relationship of congregation and pastor echoed similar university-centered debates over ministry in Germany and Scandinavia. Did pastors derive their authority via transfer from the congregation, was the ministry just a set-apart dimension of the priesthood of all believers, or was the ministry divinely instituted and the minister a representative of Christ? These arguments between function and character and the diverse positions all appeared in the structures created by immigrant churches in America. Representatives of Wilhelm Loehe’s high view of ministry took the leadership in the German Iowa Synod, while the primacy of the congregation in the ordering of ministry was clearly the position of the Norwegian Lutheran Free Church, whose founding principles opened with the statement: ‘The Congregation is the right form of the Kingdom of God on earth.’

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* Guidelines and Principles for the Lutheran Free Church, pamphlet printed in 1938, Archives of the ELCA.
The diversity of positions on ministry implied in the many structures persists within the American church. The fact that the important nineteenth-century debates on the nature of the ministry and its relationship to the congregation and society were never quite resolved in the many mergers that occurred in the twentieth century contributes to the levels of confusion and political complexity in current theological and mission debates within the ELCA.\footnote{I am indebted on this point to the Wartburg Theological Seminary’s \textit{Response to the ELCA Study of Ministry}, 1991, Appendix D, p. 6. ELCA archives.}

\textbf{Theologians Desire Statements, But Historians Look For Patterns}

Identifying the Lutheran understanding on ministry, and on the meaning of ordination, cannot be gleaned from explicit statements in official documents alone. The variety of parent bodies and the diverse historical contexts in which positions on the question develop complicate any attempt to arrive at a definitive position. The Lutheran theological faculty at Philadelphia Seminary responded to the ELCA’s latest study on ministry when it was in draft stage by saying that the many patterns that ministry assumed in the Lutheran church bodies in America showed, in their pluralism, that ministry was, as they termed it, of a secondary character. Otherwise, they implied, the Lutheran churches would not have been able to accomplish their merger.\footnote{Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, \textit{Response to the ELCA Study of Ministry}, 1991, comments on paragraphs 58–60.}

In the early twentieth century, Lutherans in America worshiped in Slovak, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish and English. Each of these separate traditions developed seminaries to train and prepare clergy and colleges to provide a church-related education for its young people. It is a popular misconception that these ethnically based churches had a parochial, insular mindset and did not envision for themselves a wider area of service. A rather triumphal refutation of this view appears in the Augustana Synod’s serial \textit{My Church} where the Illinois conference President, the Rev. Peter Peterson, expresses his understanding of that Swedish Synod’s role in the wider scheme of things. After noting that the Augustana Synod was after seventy-five years an established church and now ready for its real work, he identified the role it played in its time: ‘The Augustana Synod has a special contribution to make to the Lutheran Church of America. The Lutheran Church of America has a special contribution to make to the Lutheran Church of the world. The Lutheran Church of the world must save Protestant Christianity.’\footnote{The Rev. Peterson, Foreword to vol. 10 of \textit{My Church} (ed. Ira Nothstein; Rock Island, IL: Augustana Synod, 1924), p. 8.} The illustrated annual that these words introduced was...
addressed to a broad lay readership. It contained sketches of the work of that synod, maps of the mission fields occupied by the various Lutheran churches around the world, statistics on the property holdings and wealth of the various conferences, and reports on significant events in the world of Lutheranism. The volume ended with a short article on Ecumenical Lutheranism, a new idea presented to Lutherans around the world in the wake of the world war. John A. Morehead’s plea for a united Lutheranism ended with his vision of an ‘orderly advance of the Church in the conquest of the world for Christ’.  

Clearly the work of these Lutheran churches did not end at the chancel, but focused on service and ministry extending in wider and wider circles. The agents of this grand vision, of course, were not explicitly named. Who was to take on the role of conquering the world for Christ? How would the church advance in an orderly way? It would be safe to assume that the readers of this volume knew who was responsible for leading this advance. Each issue of My Church and the older Swedish version of the annual entitled Korsbaneret contained pictures of all newly ordained pastors. Ordination marked the identification of these men as leaders in the whole churches’ program, a ministry that extended far beyond the confines of a congregation. The churches’ pastors had been leaders in the development of the immigrant church body, and had been agents in the gradual transition from a Swedish-centered piety and language to a new, hyphenated Swedish-American church life.

**Gospel Ministry is Dialogical**

What we can learn from this history of pragmatic adaptation is the dialogical character of an authentic Gospel ministry. This transition from older, European forms of Lutheran practice to an American adaptation of these inherited forms brought immigrant settlers across several boundaries of place, time and language. In translating their heritage and finding a new language to worship and pray in, these immigrants participated in their own mission initiative, with themselves, but particularly their own children as their objects of mission. To be involved in mission is to cross boundaries and to attempt to translate the Gospel into the living language of a new time and place. Even if the church were to stay in one place, it must be in mission to stay alive, for to transmit the Gospel to a new generation, to pass on the heritage, is to cross another boundary, that of the generations. The churches’ apostolic character is seen in the way that faithful speaking and translation occur, across generations, and across cultural barriers as well.

I am of course identifying the work of preaching as the key function of ministry, and this preaching has to bring the church into a living engagement through the

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Spirit’s work with the world. This mission task has an intrinsic dialogical character to it. The immigrant Lutheran settlers may not have used the terminology of mission to describe their church-building work, but they participated in the basic tasks of translation and apostolic witness in case after case as they set about the tasks of building congregations and crafting unity. I earlier stated that it is the Lutheran position that the word and sacraments build the church. Here I wish to describe more carefully, and delineate more clearly the way in which the transactions of word speaking and administering of the sacrament do not turn into some kind of static, essential building-blocks when making the church, but retain, and pass on to the church their fluid, dialogical activity/nature. Thus the church, constituted by speaking, engaging, hearing and receiving, is necessarily formed by these acts which can be known also as the church’s mission. In being itself the church crosses boundaries carrying words from one to another, taking part in actions that bear traditions from one time and place and culture to another.

The future dimension of the church, its apostolic character, is also this same mission activity and identity. The church must keep speaking, in new languages and time, in order both to be itself and to live. This ongoing speaking and translation activity, however, ceases to be of an apostolic character if each separate group of Christians goes its own way. In order to keep together a dimension of apostolicity, congregations must share what they have done in their own vernacular, in their own local speaking, with other congregations of Christians. They must keep speaking to each other and they must remain in relationship, in dialogue, in order to test their faithfulness.

Lutherans have traditionally trusted to the functions of preaching the word and providing for the means of grace, the sacraments, to build and preserve the church. When we examine the way in which this process works, we see that the ordained cannot bring this to pass without the participation of the congregation. Congregations, by themselves, cannot be the whole church. The building of the church as a wider fellowship – as synod, diocese or conference, or more widely as a denomination or communion – also depends on these functions of word speaking and administering the sacraments. The church is built as the koinonia of the congregations develops. The structure that American Lutherans borrowed and adapted for this developing koinonia, this developing fellowship, was the synodical meeting. In these gatherings, the local translations, or adaptations in preaching and teaching the Gospel made in congregations, were tested by the wisdom of the gathered pastors and lay leaders. The kind of translation or mission work done at the synod and conference meetings related directly to the work of the ordained ministers – those responsible for the local mission, the local translation, of the Gospel. These individuals, sometimes accompanied by lay leaders, who had dual identities as pastors/local preachers and leaders and as ministerial colleagues, fashioned the developing communion among the congregations.
At these synod or district meetings, pastors examined candidates for ministry and approved them for ordination. This process has since been organized on a national level, but retains a strong synodical component, in that candidacy committees on the synod level examine and approve candidates for ordination. Throughout American Lutheran history, a candidate for ordination could never be approved on the word of only one pastor, nor could a candidate be ordained without the concurrence of other Lutheran ministers. The collegial nature of the ministry was further fostered at the annual gatherings where the ordained provided public leadership in the common deliberations of the church. They discerned together how money should be spent, who should be admitted to fellowship, now discipline should be administered, where new congregations might be started, and responded to social need with support for hospitals, orphanages, schools and programs for young people. Worship at these gatherings reminded the participants that they were a gathered church, but the very processes of speaking the word to each other, and together asking new questions of the Gospel, questions emerging from their local attempts to apply a heritage to a new situation, shows us how deeply they were involved in the self-critical work of testing their own faithfulness. This is one way to define apostolicity.

**Deliberative Structures are Mission Structures**

As American Lutherans developed their distinctive forms of church life, they were at the same time structuring a church in order not only to educate ministers and leaders, but also to conduct home and foreign mission work. The local translation they were doing in their congregational work was replicated on a much larger scale as these Lutheran church people realized that they were engaged in building much more than local churches. The process of adapting their several traditions and movements to the several regional American contexts in which they settled is a complex story, and from the local level of vernacular translation, through the synodical level where pastors met and tested their message, the incredible complexity and variety of Lutheran styles gradually met and recognized each other. The ELCA may have achieved a miracle in its merger in 1988. There were at one time well over 100 separate synods or groupings of Lutherans in the United States that enjoyed various degrees of mutual recognition and fellowship. The process of learning to recognize the essentials of a Lutheran church in the many represented was never even or easy, but the mere force of living the faith with some public integrity forced Lutherans out of isolation and into communion. When American Lutheran communities made their transition into English-speaking churches during the beginning years of the twentieth century, a new challenge faced them: now they needed to find new justification for remaining separate. As they began to articulate in English their several understandings of the Lutheran tradition, a
greater Lutheran unity began to emerge, again dependent upon the process of speaking, interpreting, listening, arguing, judging and discerning.

Serious efforts to create inter-Lutheran unity began in the period between the world wars, building on earlier co-operation in mission work and military chaplaincy. Theological foundations for unity existed, but disagreements about the extent and manner of subscription to the Lutheran confessional documents (sometimes called symbols) emerged as the most significant of the many disagreements among the Lutheran bodies. Some Lutheran churches expected others to subscribe to additional theological statements or theses before there could be any kind of mutual recognition. Typically these included a statement indicating acceptance of the infallibility or inerrancy of scripture. These unity processes were largely conducted and argued by clergy. Conditions for fellowship were issued by one church to another and these often included the acceptance of specific statements on biblical inerrancy and disavowal and even disciplinary measures against clergy who may have participated in any kind of co-operation with other Christians.

Given the nature of the disagreements over doctrine and polity, it is understandable that laypeople did not expect or demand to be included in these deliberations. The hoped-for unity across the entire span of American Lutheranism did not emerge, however, for separate understandings of scripture, the role of the congregation and the shape of the clergy kept the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) out of the broader, more ecumenically oriented American Lutheranism characterized by the ELCA.

The ordination of women, in particular, signaled the biggest divide within American Lutheranism. The decision to go ahead with this step was made by two-thirds of American Lutherans who were members of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in the early 1970s, but their decision initiated a reaction within the more conservative LCMS. Conservative forces mustered the support for the election of a president who would adamantly oppose this development within their ranks. Seminary professors in the LCMS Concordia Seminary system who taught in such a way as to possibly suggest some kind of openness to newer interpretations of the historic male-only pattern for ministry were dismissed from their posts. A student walkout supported the exiled faculty at Concordia and a new seminary in exile, seminex, provided the catalyst for the eventual formation of the ELCA. The women’s issue was not the only issue prompting the split within Missouri, but I think it demonstrates for us a

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11 An exchange between writers for the General Council and the Iowa Synod papers in 1909 brought to light the fact that Lutheran groups were carefully reading each other’s papers, and reacting strongly to any slight or mischaracterization. The Lutheran Review (ed. Theodore Schmauk; Philadelphia, 1908), vol. 27, pp. 361ff.

significant shift in the way that Lutherans had begun to think about the authority of the ordained in the congregation.

The shift in understanding authority represented by this internal struggle has a direct bearing on the way that ordination and mission should be yoked. If there ever was a time when a minister could step into a congregation and assume a kind of automatic authority to speak the word and make it stick, to help the Gospel come alive in a place and time, this time was past. The decision to ordain women dramatically reoriented everyone’s ordinary and probably outworn assumptions about authority. If the move to ordain women signaled an undue idealism on the part of proponents, the women who joined the ranks of the clergy shouldered the task of negotiating authority within congregations. The experience of these women demonstrated that ordination did not confer upon these women the authority of office or character that could elicit from congregants the same kind of understanding or response that they gave to a male holding the position. It was a new experience for congregations to be preached to by a woman, and most often by a young woman figuring out how to be a pastor.

An African proverb sums up my own experience as well as that of many other women in this way: ‘Walking makes the road.’ I am not suggesting that it is only women who have to negotiate a new relationship with a congregation, and that men can step into a role ready-made for them. Neither can assume an automatic authority in the parish or in society. We live in a time when authority does not come with the office, or adhere to a person. My experience in learning how important it is for ministry to build trusting relationships has helped me read American Lutheran history in such a way to notice that Muhlenberg, and the many immigrant pastors who followed him, had also to negotiate their way into a kind of authority in their ministry. Jesus’ advice to the disciples who went out to the towns and villages and who sometimes met people who would not hear them, tells us that our situation is hardly novel. Sometimes you have to wipe off the dust from your sandals.

The classic debate about ordination, whether it should be understood as functional or ontological, a matter of office or of character, does not give us any purchase on the complex dynamic of actual ministry in a place. It too easily assumes a static form of authority that is given, somehow, in the office, or to the person, and naively expects that the community should recognize this in some kind of automatic way and respond accordingly. The classic Lutheran understanding of the operation of the word – that when preached the Holy Spirit will be carried along with it, and trigger a faith response – can also be faulted for assuming a unilateral, or univocal, understanding of the way that the word, and faith, is communicated, elevating the role of the ordained as the dispenser of all good. The congregated hearers are not recognized as active participants in this encounter. Similarly, during the missionary heyday, Westerners assumed that the word had only to be preached, in western
forms, and with western ideas, and Christian communities could be formed, mimicking in every respect the patterns of the sending culture.

What we know about mission, and about the incarnational aspect of translation, that the word became flesh, and that the Gospel can be spoken in any language, tells us that the receiving of the word, the listening of the people, is the completion of the action of speaking and telling. There is no word shared unless there is an assembly to hear and respond. In order for the word to truly be heard, and not just tolerated, moreover, there must be a relationship of mutual influence and trust. For that reason I contend that ordination is itself an ordering of the relationship between the assembly, or congregation and the minister. It is very much a community affair; it is very much the inauguration of this mission work, a relationship of local speaking and receiving, and the relationship of pastor and people is formed as this is organized and set in motion. The pastor, in turn, along with lay leaders, can represent this local congregation in the wider sphere or *koinonia* of congregations. Another level of mutual trust and influence is possible around the ministry of bishops and further in the ecumenical relationships of churches. Everywhere the Christian way is the way of speaking and hearing the Gospel, and this is how the church is built.

In developing this mission perspective, I recognize that in focusing on the word-centered, mission-oriented understanding of the role of the ordained, I have not written specifically about other essential aspects of the ministry of the ordained – the sacramental, grace-giving hospitality of the table, about welcoming guests, about pilgrim lives, about visiting each other and extending the Christian *koinonia* through mutual recognition and sharing gifts. Ordination can also be understood in this mission dynamic as providing order and purpose for our hospitality. I only mention that here in order to suggest that the relational network that Christians have worked so hard to build in the last century’s ecumenical movement, and the transformation of former ‘daughter’ churches into sister churches, will be advanced also by practices of hospitality, and ministry focused only on deliberative structures will never achieve the fullness of *koinonia*. Another essay could well be written on this aspect of the mechanics of ecclesial relationships, but a brief mention will have to suffice here.

The largest numbers of immigrants to America today come from the South – from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Since the Immigration Act of 1965, which opened the doors again to migration, the preponderance of new Americans are no longer former Europeans, and one might think that fewer and fewer Lutherans would be among them. New arrivals are Lutheran, however, from Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia and Tanzania, together with Palestinians, Philipino and El Salvadorans, who occasionally show up in unsuspecting Lutheran congregations. They have brought us a new missionary moment. These refugees and immigrants are living examples of the process of globalization, but they travel on older paths that had once carried traffic in the opposite direction. Coming to the North these new immigrants bring with them their own variety of Christianity, and many come from Lutheran
churches. Ethiopian Christians from the Mekane Jesus Church have formed congregations in the north-eastern part of the United States, and their internal development shows all the signs of repeating many of the internal devotional and ecclesial disputes that shaped Lutheran communities in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lutherans in America will never be finished arguing and defining themselves, for the process of adaptation to a new environment and time is rigorous and stimulating. But Lutherans will be well served by recognizing the key role that the ordained have in the midst of these developing communities, and in the public sphere. They are guiding the process of local translation and are the stewards of that effort to maintain the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

Lutherans founded agencies for the resettlement of refugees after the world wars in the twentieth century, mostly for Lutheran people fleeing from lands that had become communist. Now these institutions provide hospitality and legal advice for refugees from many lands, who have a very difficult time negotiating with ever more stringent immigration laws. Many of these refugees are actually from Lutheran churches in their homeland. The political dimensions to welcoming refugees have changed, and an easy anti-communism cannot be invoked as a rationale for an automatic American welcome. Church involvement in this work of welcome will depend on proper leadership, and it is one of the more hidden, but important, challenges that will face Lutherans in the United States. Briefly put, the kinds of complications in negotiating among so many political variables demands a high degree of cultural proficiency. Being a pastor of a congregation in this globalizing world is not a simple matter.

The ELCA's constitution describes the nature of the church in terms of congregations and their role in relationship to the wider community of the faithful:

> The church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations. This church, therefore, derives its character and powers both from the sanction and representation of its congregations and from its inherent nature as an expression of the broader fellowship of the faithful. In length, it acknowledges itself to be in the historic continuity of the communion of saints; in breadth, it expresses the fellowship of believers and congregations in our day.12

By linking the local and universal dimensions of the church, the constitution provides its answer to the perennial question of where the church is essentially located, and how the ministry, the ordained, should see their role. There is a mission dimension, a universal aspect, to the work of speaking the word, and the actions that assemble the

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12 Chapter 3, ‘Nature of the Church’, paragraph 2, ELCA Constitution.

people around the sacraments. The ongoing speaking of the Gospel, in terms that the local people can hear and understand, must be tested against the word spoken in other places. Clergy cannot be faithful to their calling if they isolate themselves in their own particular setting and do not shape their ministry collegially. In our ecumenical agreements this process of mutual admonition and encouragement is mentioned as a fruit of the new arrangements. I would argue that this coming together to speak to one another is not something that can be safely put off or reserved until some unilateral move by one partner offends another. Admonition is not something that can be delivered unilaterally, and cheerleading from the sidelines does not materially affect the work at hand. To be involved in mission, one must cross a few boundaries, and in crossing divest oneself of any presumed authority. The context for our work today, a world in need of relationships that transcend race, nation, class and tribe, needs us Christians to bring with us a new capacity for fellowship, for speaking to, and for hearing each other.

Dialogue does not have to end in agreement, but it will create a relationship. Developments within any one communion can provoke argument and should be discussed in common precisely because they might otherwise seriously impair the relationships that build the wider unity sought for the church. The ordination of women has been a major change among Protestants, and many argued that it would stand in the way of the ecumenical movement. For those who assume that traditional, more static conceptions of authority must or will prevail in the church, the ordination of women will be a stumbling block. The living experience of churches that have experienced new leadership and engagement with their local context provides a witness that will need to be heard in wider and wider circles. More recently, the recent advancement in the United States of an openly gay bishop for the Episcopal diocese of New Hampshire will test the fabric of relationships the Anglican Communion.

The integrity of local decision-making, as churches discern how to speak the Gospel in their own particular place, is an important mission principle. At the same time, the local translations that are made must also be tested in relationship to the experiences of other churches in their own places. African churches that determine how to speak the Gospel in a context where plural marriages are the norm have also to bring their decisions about the Gospel’s word to a wider circle. And, for us all, the bigger issues may not, in the end, be about sex, but about money. There was a time when the church worried about food, and missed the bigger point about an inclusive Gospel. We also may be missing the point in our own deliberations, but the fact that we are talking together, and speaking the word to each other, makes us engaged in the work of the church, and I believe that the Holy Spirit will not fail to be with us.

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Joking Apart: Exploring Comedy and Irony in Anglican Polity

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ABSTRACT

Congregational studies, as a distinct field of study within the broader compass of practical theology, is normally focused upon specific congregations and their issues. In this article, the ground-breaking and quixotic work of James Hopewell (1987) is used to interpret an aspect of the Anglican Communion, namely its use of humour as pivotal conduit for mediating important aspects of its identity. The article argues that, in Hopewellian terms, Anglican identity is often ‘comic-ironic’ in orientation, which allows it to imagine its future, whilst reflecting wryly upon its besetting crises. In turn, this requires ecclesiology to take more notice of the numerous amounts of ‘incidental’ material that help construct ecclesial identity.

A candidate for one of the most teasing opening lines in modern English literature must be from Rose Macaulay’s *The Towers of Trezibond*:

‘Take my camel, dear’, said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass…”1

*The Towers of Trezibond* is an absurd, comic and beautiful tale, which offers the inimitable Aunt Dot, her niece Laurie and Father Chantry-Pigg, and their expedition to Turkey to explore the scope for converting the Turks – not just to any old Christianity, but to Anglicanism. By establishing a High Anglican mission, the trio hope to bring salvation and civilization to the country. Aunt Dot is particularly keen on the emancipation of Turkish women: through a wider use of the bathing hat.

Despite Macaulay’s comic novel, there is, ironically, a well-established Anglican presence in Turkey. But the scope of this article is not to take issue with parodies of Anglicanism (e.g. ‘CofE’ = Comedy of Errors). It is, rather, to introduce the

work of James Hopewell,\(^2\) an exponent of congregational studies and contextual theology, to examine the comic and ironic identity of mainstream Anglicanism, and thereby identify those hidden aspects of its appeal that have turned a single English denomination into a worldwide presence.

Globally, there are around 77 million Anglicans. They are spread over thirty-six self-governing churches, comprising 500 dioceses, 30,000 parishes with around 65,000 congregations, located in a total of 165 countries. While not ranking among the largest groupings of Christians, the Anglican Church is, after the Roman Catholic Church, arguably one of the most widespread and influential denominations in the world. (Anglicanism is by no means confined to the Commonwealth, which has fifty-three countries – less than a third of the total in which Anglicanism is to be found.) However, the ‘Anglican Communion’ also evokes what Benedict Anderson describes as an ‘imagined community’.\(^3\) Most its members have never met one another, and never will. Yet members will readily acknowledge a deep, horizontal comradeship of belonging. The Communion is bound together by an ethos, codes, memories and aspirations that allow it to cohere in the minds of its members, but without that coherence necessarily being practised at either a deep or extensive level. In this regard, we can regard the Anglican Communion as a kind of filial network of understanding (not unlike a family: see Sykes),\(^4\) in which certain types of belief and certain modes of behaviour are cherished. As Pascal Boyer notes:

One thing modern humans did and still do vastly more than any other species is exchange information of all kinds and qualities, not just about what is the case but also what should be or could be; not just about their emotions and knowledge but also about their plans, memories and conjectures. The proper milieu in which humans live is that of information, especially information provided by other[s]. It is their ecological niche.\(^5\)

There can be no question that Anglicanism, and its ecological niche, contains elements of coherence, and a notion of a shared life and identity, bound together through a common sense of purpose, history and teleology. But what exactly are those ‘things’ that are particular to Anglican identity? Authors such as Sykes, Avis, Booty and Wright would be able to nominate particular theological priorities. From a sociological perspective, we can point to Pickering’s work that identifies ambiguity and aesthetics as being culturally significant,\(^6\) or my own suggestion


that Anglicanism is a ‘sacralized system of manners’ as being somehow vital to its understanding.\(^7\) Analogically, Boyer suggests that:

> If we consider the whole domain of information [within an organization] over time we have a gigantic ‘soup’ of representations and messages. The messages are constantly changing because the contexts change ... However, we also find that there are lumps in this soup of messages, that is, bits of information that seem to appear in rather similar form at different times and in different places. They are not strictly identical but we find a small number of templates that seem to organise them. Religious concepts and behaviours are like that ...\(^8\)

In this article, I want to suggest that the ‘soup’ of the Anglican Communion contains such lumps. However, here I am less interested in the obvious theological priorities of the Communion, and more concerned with the nascent cultural distinctives that shape and flavour the Communion. In exploring and analysing these, and using the work of James Hopewell, I will seek to demonstrate that much of Anglicanism is an inherently ironic and comic type of faith, which, when understood culturally, can in turn illuminate some of the current theological and ecclesiological debates that preoccupy the church. Again, as Boyer notes:

> Religion is cultural. People get it from other people, as they get food preferences, musical tastes, politeness and dress sense. We often tend to think that if something is cultural then it is hugely variable. But it then turns out that food preferences and other such cultural things are not so variable after all. Food preferences revolve around certain recurrent flavours, musical tastes within strict constraints, and so do politeness codes and standards of elegance ...\(^9\)

The next section will therefore look at Hopewell’s ‘cultural reading’ of the church in order to identify and explicate these ‘lumps’, ‘tastes’ and ‘preferences’. From that vantage point, it will then be possible to explore the Anglican Communion as a cultural system (granted, it is strained and multi-flavoured). A final section returns to the idea of Anglican culture, and evaluates its coherence.

**Anglicanism as Irony and Comedy**

Hopewell is well aware that it is only recently that ‘participant observation’ has gained any credibility in academic studies of culture, and that this in turn has been driven by anthropologists and ethnographers, who have urged scholars to become ‘immersed’ in the very field of their enquiry. However, participant observers

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who have studied congregations in any depth are still comparatively rare. Most studies tend to be, in Hopewell’s words, ‘travelogues’, giving accounts of churches and congregations that are based on anecdotes and texts. In contrast, Hopewell, who in turn acknowledges his debt to the work of Melvin Williams and Samuel Heilman,\(^\text{10}\) argues for the studies of congregations to be undertaken through the ‘observing participant’ – congregations themselves learning to function ‘as if’ they were themselves outsiders. It is through such strategies that congregations and scholars can become attuned to the myriad of manners and codes that participants often take for granted. Thus, Hopewell suggests that ‘sounding the depths’ of a congregation must be a deeper task that pays attention to such things as:

- jokes, stories, lore … parish conversations that follow administrative meetings
- sermons, classroom presentation … use of space … line of authority … use of time … conscious and unconscious symbols … conflict …\(^\text{11}\)

But how could paying attention to such trivia and ephemera reveal something about the fundamental nature and identity of a church, or something as complex as the Anglican Communion? To illustrate this simply, consider the following three jokes about Anglicanism:

1. **Question:** How many Anglicans does it take to change a light-bulb?
   **Answer:** Five – one to put in the new one, and four to admire the old one.

2. One day, the Archbishop of Canterbury is sitting alone on the beach, trying to enjoy a holiday and a retreat. It has been another hard year. He gazes out towards the horizon where the sun is still rising, and sighs. Presently, his eye catches something gleaming in the sand. He brushes away the grains, and pulls out a brass canister. Seeing an inscription, he spits on it and polishes it, but before he can read it, the canister explodes in a haze of blue smoke. The Archbishop rubs his eyes, and is surprised to find, standing before him, a large Genie. ‘Your Grace’, says the Genie, ‘I will grant you one wish – whatever you want: just name it’. The Archbishop reaches inside his cassock pocket, and pulls out a map of the Middle East. With a crayon, he draws a large red circle around the whole area. ‘I’d like you to bring peace to this region’, he says. The Genie does not reply. He sits on the sand, and looks at the rising sun. He says nothing for ten minutes. Then, turning again to the Archbishop, he says: ‘I have never said this to anyone before, but what you ask is beyond me. It is too difficult. But if you have another wish, I will grant that’. The Archbishop pauses, and then reaches inside for another map. This is a map of the world, with 165 countries coloured in. ‘This is the Anglican Communion’, says the

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\(^{10}\) Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 89.

\(^{11}\) Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 89.
Archbishop, ‘and all I ask is that you help all the many different parts to get on a little better’. The Genie sits back down on the sand again, and looks towards the sun. Again, for ten minutes, he says nothing. Then he stands up, and turns to the Archbishop. ‘Your Grace’, he says, ‘do you think I could have another look at that first map?’

3. One day, the queues of people to get into heaven are so long and thick that the Angels guarding the Pearly Gates begin to panic. They fly off to see Jesus and ask for advice. Jesus suggests that potential entrants are graded. He will ask a question of everyone seeking entry, and depending on how they answer, they will either be placed in the slow track, or granted immediate entry. The question Jesus proposes to use is the same question he once put to the disciples: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ The first person Jesus encounters at the gates is a Methodist minister. Jesus asks her, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ The minister hesitates, and then answers, ‘Well, at Conference last year …’ But Jesus interrupts her immediately. ‘I am sorry’, he says, ‘but I asked you for your opinion, and not for your denominational line. Would you mind going to the back of the queue? Thank you.’ The next person to step forward is a Roman Catholic monk. Jesus poses the same question, to which the monk replies, ‘Well, our Pope says …’ But Jesus again interrupts, and points out that he wanted the monk’s opinion, not the Pope’s. Third, a Baptist minister approaches. His response to Jesus’ question is emphatic: ‘The Bible says …’ But Jesus again interrupts, and reminds the minister that he wanted his opinion, not his knowledge. Finally, an Anglican priest approaches. Jesus regards the minister somewhat quizzically, but puts the question to him nonetheless. The Anglican replies categorically: ‘You are the Christ – the Son of the living God.’ Jesus is slightly taken aback by such an ardent response from an Episcopalian, and is about to let the Anglican priest in, when the priest adds ‘But then again, on the other hand …’

These jokes reveal several things about the nature of Anglicanism. First, they are jokes told by Anglicans to one another, as well as to others, suggesting that they possess the capacity for gentle, self-mocking comic irony. Second, the light-bulb joke makes a serious point: admiration of the past is an important feature of Anglican life. But it can get out of hand. Third, the joke about the Archbishop and the Genie recognizes the acute difficulties in maintaining Anglican polity. Fourth, the joke about the Anglican priest at the Pearly Gates celebrates the inherent ambivalence of Anglicanism; the way in which it glories in seeing situations from different points of view, and holds a variety of viewpoints together, even though such convictions may be competing with another, and cause a degree of tension. Fifth, the jokes reveal a real fondness for the way Anglicanism is, including its flaws.
Indeed, the flaws are being intrinsically linked to its virtues, which all three jokes highlight, albeit ironically.

The careful noting of this apparently incidental material is important for any ethnography of a church, let alone an entire Communion. Paul Willis, in his *The Ethnographic Imagination* suggests that many conventional types of ethnography overlook the sensate and felt aspects of bodies, societies or situations under scrutiny. He argues that careful attention paid to artifacts, poetry, sayings, humour and sensations can provide important registers of the mood and shape of a given subject. Therefore to try and capture the visual, sensate and experienced aspects of a community can provide important indicators that conventional fieldwork might normally miss. In this respect, Willis is doing no more than building on Raymond Williams's earlier work on cultures, arguing that they are often constituted through 'structures of feeling'. Indeed, we might go further here, and suggest that the Anglican Communion itself is a 'structure of feeling'; it senses its kinship, ties and shape, but hardly ever sees these fully reified.

Thus, and to return to the Anglican jokes, the mere fact that Anglicans appear to be able to tolerate (or even celebrate?) a certain amount of gentle, self-mocking comic irony reveals something about the nature of the movement itself. Because it would still appear to be meaningful to speak of Anglicanism as a 'community of moral discourse', in spite of the stresses and strains on particular issues, the role of humour and irony (in diffusing disputes and mediating wisdom) may turn out to be more critical than many will readily realize.

But before tackling that issue, we need to explore what a community of moral discourse might be? Hopewell suggests that it is a gathering of people that are explicitly intent of surveying and critically assessing their personal, social and moral convictions together, because there is already some prior nascent consensus about the loyalty that binds them together as a group. Such ties need not be explicit. Indeed, we might say that any attempt to make them so can be problematic. Part of the genius of Anglicanism arguably lies in its fundamental 'unsolvedness'. Its major problems of moral coherence only emerge when it attempts to clarify itself, instead of allowing competing convictions to continue to gestate within a broadly sacramental understanding of the church.

To press the discussion a little more, we note that anthropologists such as Geertz distinguish between the ethos of a community and its worldview. The worldview is the 'ideal' shape of the world (to come?) that guides the life of community. In contrast, the ethos refers to those values and codes that the group currently maintains. The two are of course related, and as Hopewell points out, the bonds

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14 Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 144.

that link ethos and worldview are not only creeds and formal religious statements, but also whole value systems and narrative streams that may be seldom understood or explicitly revealed. In my own participant observation of Anglicanism (indeed, as an observing participant, since I am an ordained Anglican priest), I have been continually struck by the capacity of the wider Communion for what I have already described as gentle, self-mocking comic irony. Could it be, in Hopewell’s and Geertz’s terminology, that this characteristic actually links the ethos and worldview in Anglicanism? In other words, the cultural ecclesiology of Anglicanism is mild, temperate, given to measured humour, but also anticipates the ultimacy of a sacramental resolution to all serious forms of dispute and the threat of schism or incoherence? In order to investigate this further, it is necessary to explain Hopewell’s understanding of comedy and irony in ecclesiological narrative streams, and then test this ‘reading’ of Anglicanism against current debates.

**Hopewell: The Comic and Ironic Turns**

In David Hare’s *Racing Demon*, an ironic and comic play about Anglican clergy in London during the 1980s, a central feature of the plot is the division between those who think ‘things will work out alright’, and those for whom the church has reached breaking point. The latter position is represented by a fictitious Bishop of London, who consistently narrates a ‘tragic’ understanding of the church and the world. In Hare’s play, the divisions between the characters are, on the surface, theological. But Hare is able to exploit the deeper partitions that separate the characters, and these are more typically concerned with worldviews and expectations. Although the play ends, to a degree, in a mire of tragedy, its overall character is ironic-comic. According to Hopewell, true comedies begin with entering a world in which there is misunderstanding, crisis and calamity, but end:

in unions, pacts, embraces and marriages – that symbolize the ultimately trustworthy working of the world. Created in misinformation and convoluted by error, a comedy is resolved by the disclosure of a deeper knowledge about the harmonious way things really are …

Hopewell sees the comic genre as one that pivots on integration. Personally, a situation of ignorance is responded to with enlightenment, with the resolution being peace. Socially, discord is met with wisdom, and leads to harmony. Cosmically, illusion is addressed by process, and resolved through union. The key cognitive feature of the comic worldview is wisdom, and because of this, the minister is most commonly a ‘guide’, the Eucharist a ‘sacrament’, the church ‘pilgrimage’ and

16 Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 54.
the gospel ‘consciousness’.\footnote{Hopewell, \textit{Congregation}, pp. 70–71.} Granted, these descriptions from Hopewell must be understood as characterizations to some extent. But they are a reasonable ‘fit’ for much of the ‘inner life’ of Anglicanism. For example, when Canon Jeffrey John was forced to step down from being nominated as Bishop of Reading in the Diocese of Oxford in the summer of 2003, his parting shot was to write to the local paper in Reading, and state that ‘love, in the end, will win.’ This was his response to the chaos of potential schism and disharmony: to reassert that there was bound to be a truly ‘comic’ ending to a tragic farce.

For many people reading Hopewell, the denominational thinking that would most closely correspond to the comic genre (or ‘gnostic negotiation’, as Hopewell prefers to call it) is Quakerism. This is not an unreasonable assumption, based on Hopewell’s own understanding of the worldview that he articulates. However, the genre also closely resonates with the kind of idealized and slightly mystical sacramentalism that characterizes much of Anglicanism’s own absorption with its (imagined) Communion. Put another way, doctrinal differences or moral incoherence will ultimately ‘melt away’, since the Communion is gathered around one table, sharing in one common baptism, and will be unable to resist exchanging the kiss of peace. Differences over gender, sexuality and other matters will be seen in their true light: as secondary issues that do not interfere with the primacy of the sacramental nature of the Communion. Communion is about unity, not uniformity: difference can be celebrated where there is peace and harmony.

In this regard, as Hopewell correctly points out, the comic genre is ‘utterly dependable’: bafflement and confusion are ultimately overcome by wisdom and love. Harmony replaces discord. This is, of course, a positive and optimistic ecclesiology, which assumes a kind of ‘inner energy’ within the ethos that drives it, teleologically, towards its worldview. Ultimately, all in the end is harvest. Not even death can stand in the way of a mystical unity, for which, at worst, a broken Communion points us towards.

The positivism of the comic genre is, of course, only one-half of the equation that shapes Anglicans’ self-understanding of the Communion. The other half is more contingent, and is habitually posited in irony:

Miracles do not happen; patterns lose their design; life is unjust, not justified by transcendent forces. Trapped in an ironic world, one shrugs one’s shoulders about reports of divine ultimacies and intimacies. Instead of expecting such supernatural outcomes, one embraces one’s brothers and sisters in camaraderie.\footnote{Hopewell, \textit{Congregation}, pp. 61–67.}

Hopewell, in developing the ironic genre, tends to put a more reductionist gloss on the worldview than many would normally be prepared to own. The genre is
characteristically ‘liberal’ in its orientation, with a strong sympathy for organic and contextual ecclesiological models. But this does not, in my view, necessarily mean that those who inhabit the ironic worldview are likely to dismiss the realm of the supernatural, which Hopewell often assumes will be the case. That said, Hopewell’s characterization of ironic ecclesiology contains many features that Anglicans will find resonant. The key motif is testing; variation leads (ultimately) to conformity. Personally, a situation of bondage is met with honesty, and resolved through love. Socially, oppression is met by justice and resolved through the establishment of community. The focus of valued behaviour is realism and integrity. Theologically, Jesus is a ‘teacher’; the minister an ‘enabler’; the church ‘fellowship’ and the Gospel ‘freedom’.19

Hopewell, in discussing this outlook, recognizes that ironic ecclesiologies and worldviews are in fact best characterized as ‘cosmopolitan religion’. Living with differences is a sign of integrity. Thus, and following Wade Clark Roof, Hopewell notes that those who are most attracted to ‘ironic’ religion may want to avoid organized religion altogether, but tend nonetheless to be faithful church members who affirm:

(a) the centralality of ethical principles in their meaning systems; (b) a parsimony of beliefs, few attributions of numinosity; (c) breadth of perspective; (d) piety defined as a personal search for meaning; and (e) licence to doubt.20

Perhaps inevitably, this draws those with primarily ironic worldviews towards a theological terrain that is packed with deep ambiguity and paradox. Within contemporary Anglicanism this tradition is perhaps best exemplified by writers such as David Jenkins, John Habgood and the early work of Richard Holloway. In working with congregations and groups where the ironic worldview dominates, one can observe how paradox is not only testing, but also persuasive and nourishing. Thus, phrases that can speak of the incarnation in angular and slightly avuncular ways (e.g. Launcelot Andrewes’ ‘the Speechless Word’, or Rowan Williams’ more recent notion of the ‘spastic Christ-child’) will invariably absorb individuals and groups in hours of patient spiritual musings. In the ironic worldview, anomaly and paradox are givens.

Given these remarks, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that some of the core proponents of the Anglican Communion are, in Hopewellian terms, comic-ironic in orientation. Or, to return to Boyer, these are just two of the ‘lumps’ in the soup that is Anglicanism. They anticipate a form of sacramental unity that will ultimately bear its own fruit. But they are sagacious enough to know that the path to unity is littered with pitfalls and potholes that require the mind of an empiricist rather than

19 Hopewell, Congregation, pp. 70–71.
20 Hopewell, Congregation, pp. 81–83.
an idealist. Again, in Hopewellian terms, the ‘model’ of the church that emerges from this worldview is a combination of perspectives. On the one hand it comprises *organicist* views: ‘developing towards a final integrated reality which is unapparent in its present state’.

On the other, it is both *mechanist* and *formist*, which recognizes that the church is a collectivity of structures that can be regulated and adjusted. Still again, the church is *contextualist*, shaped by the very cultural forces that it seeks to shape. For Hopewell, the analogy of the church (or Communion in this case) as a house allows an analyst to see that:

> as a house within the world, ‘house’ emphasizes its participation in the frame of all language. Human imagination as a whole provides the particular idiomatic and narrative construction of a congregation; its members communicate by a code derived from the totality of forms and stories by which societies cohere. In such a picture … church culture is not reduced to a series of propositions that a credal checklist adequately probes. Rather, the congregation takes part in the nuance and narrative of full human discourse. It persists as a recognizable storied dwelling within the whole horizon of human interpretation.

**Comic Endings: What is the Future for the Anglican Communion?**

The late and lamented theologian, Robert Carroll, once described the Anglican way of doing theology as ‘the Dodo’s incorporative principle – a means by which everyone wins’. Anglicans, in trying to sort out doctrinal differences amongst themselves, were always arguing about the precise weight that should be given to scripture, tradition, reason and culture. The ground rules for such debates always guaranteed inclusion for participants and most reasonable points of view – even those one might passionately oppose. All sides in any debate could always claim a moral victory, since final decisions were seldom reached. It is precisely this kind of ecclesiology that has made Anglicanism – rather like a Dodo – such a rare bird for several centuries. But is the rarity and novelty of Anglicanism about to slide into self-inflicted extinction?

To be sure, one would want to begin any outline sketch for an answer by observing that the comic-ironic axis is not unique to the ‘DNA’ of Anglicanism. Quite recently I was lecturing to a group of United Churches of Christ pastors in Connecticut, who cheerfully informed me that ‘UCC’ stood for ‘Unitarians Considering Christ’. They certainly understood the value of not taking themselves too seriously. Most of them accepted that there was a considerable gap between Kingdom of God/Gospel values and the life of the church. Similarly, when I have

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22 Hopewell, *Congregation*, p. 201.
worked with Methodist educators in seminars and consultations, they have shown themselves to be almost wholly disposed to a Hopewellian ironic worldview, with mild flecks of comic ethos. So Anglicanism is not the only polity in which an ironic-comic worldview plays an important role.

Having said that, the Archbishop of Canterbury has a particularly unenviable task in trying to hold together some hotly held competing convictions. Liberals are calling on him to support the choice of an openly gay bishop, partly to confirm the identity of the church as being relevant and inclusive. Conservatives want the Archbishop to offer unequivocal condemnation, claiming that a gay bishop is a departure from all scriptural and ecclesial norms. It is a no-win situation for the Archbishop of Canterbury. Leading the Church of England, it is often said, is like trying to herd cats. Precocious and un-biddable creatures, they roam where they please. The job of leading the Anglican Communion then, is, therefore, many times worse. The Episcopal Church in America will go one way; Anglicans in Sydney and Nigeria will go another. Correspondingly, there is no shortage of prophets who are predicting that this is ‘the beginning of the end’: but is it?

It seems unlikely, given what we have already said about Anglicanism as comedy: it is hopeful about a harmonious future in which discord is ultimately banished. But comedy needs to be rooted in reality, and in Hopewellian terms, this is where an ecclesial synergy between irony and comedy can come into its own. The comedy can imagine a future together; irony can face the despair of separatism. So in all probability, the elixir that will sustain the Communion will be to find unity without imposing uniformity. Put another way, a degree of separation shouldn’t necessarily mean schism, let alone divorce. Indeed, a slight loosening of the ties could help Anglican churches retain their global identity, while developing their provincial individuality. Instead of one single monolithic Communion, the possibility of developing a ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘family’ of Anglican churches, where there is some detachment yet attachment, may need to be explored more seriously. Specifically, Anglicans may need to examine the implications of agreeing to live apart, while still retaining filial links and obligations, and also remaining friends and neighbours. Such an ironic-comic turn should not be beyond the grasp of an Anglican Communion that combines humour, realism and hope in equal measure.

That said, there will be those who want to argue the very opposite of this, namely for a Communion in which the bonds between parties are deepened and intra-provincial obligations formalized, with discipline and coherence made far more obvious. This could lead to a stronger central structure, with (perhaps) a core canon law that could provide for Anglican ecclesiology as a whole. To be sure, this vision has its merits. But its actual implementation will depend, ironically, not on imposing the will of an elite on an ‘imagined Communion’ (to quote Benedict Anderson
again). Rather, it will require the shared re-discovery of those values, courtesies, conventions and cultures that made the Communion what it was in the first place. With a typical ironic-comic turn, I prophesy that the Anglican Communion will only re-discover itself through grace; it cannot make itself by law.

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ABSTRACT

In the cosmology and theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Church has not often been considered to possess any significant function. In fact, Teilhard devotes considerable attention to several key ecclesiological questions. Fundamental to the Christian mission of the conversion of the world to Christ is an incarnational theology of the conversion of the Church to the world. This requires the Church to accept the modern world as currently and contingently constituted. The Church spiritually transforms the materiality of the world in its sacraments and through the practical works of its members. It provides the physical means of the convergence of the world towards its final unity, and for this reason calls its members to obedience, despite its imperfections. Catholicism has the potential to bring all Christians to unity in a self-transforming ecumenism that could also encompass other faiths.

In a note written for Jean-Baptiste Janssens, his Jesuit Superior General, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expresses the wish that his work will provide a ‘porch’ into the Church for many of their contemporaries. This accurately summarizes Teilhard’s theological aim: to provide an interpretation of the historic Christian religion that addresses the modern world in its current, contingent particularity, and is founded upon the essential and unchanging gospel truths. That has, to some extent, been his achievement. What makes this qualification necessary is that Teilhard’s identity as a theologian and apologist for Catholic Christianity has frequently been occluded, for better or worse, by his expositors and supporters. Analysis of his theology, and creative interpretations of it, have often depended more on his scientific and philosophical theories than on his theological ones. This has had the effect of displacing Teilhard from mainstream Christian theological discourse. In this article, I will attempt to redress some of the imbalance by examining his ecclesiology. In particular, I will consider his claims about the mission and authority of the Catholic Church, and its relations with other churches, faiths, and the wider world.

In the preface to his principal theological work, Teilhard states: ‘The most traditional Christianity, expressed in Baptism, the Cross and the Eucharist, can be interpreted to embrace all that is best in the aspirations peculiar to our times’. He is intensely aware of living in a new era, in which past traditions, customs and views of what the world should be like are no longer accepted without question. Teilhard’s effort to present the historic Christian faith, into which he had been born and in which he grew, in terms that engaged modern society, became a project that continued for a lifetime. He wishes to examine ways in which the existing Church might orient itself in relation to a world that is passing through an era of profound change and becoming. He is not concerned, however, to develop a detailed analysis of structures, nor to make prescriptions for change: he takes the current ordering of the Church as given.

Teilhard argues that the Church has become progressively more estranged from what the inaugural words of Gaudium et Spes refer to as ‘the joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today’. He considers the origins of this process of separation to lie in the Renaissance humanism of the fifteenth century, when a significant corpus of science, art and learning began to flourish independently of ecclesial patronage. Nevertheless, responsibility for the designation of the fruits of this movement as ‘secular’ rests, he suggests, entirely with the Church. Teilhard describes the resulting clash between the Church and the ‘secular’ world proclaimed by many theologians in the following stark terms:

Think of all the infantile maledictions pronounced by Churchmen against new ideas! Think of all the avenues of enquiry that have at first been forbidden and later found to be rich in results! Think of all the futile subterfuges designed to make people believe that the Church was directing a movement by which it was, in fact, being forcibly dragged along! In his later work, Teilhard states that the stage of development through which the world is passing is not the continuation of this process, but a qualitatively new phenomenon, which he terms ‘neo-humanism’. This is defined, in general

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3 Teilhard’s consciousness of the world was transformed by his service as a stretcher-bearer during the First World War, when he produced his first mature theological essays. Many of these are included in the collection *Writings in Time of War* (London: Collins, 1968). See also *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier Priest, 1914–1919* (London: Collins, 1965).
7 ‘My Fundamental Vision’, in *Toward the Future*, pp. 192 and 202–203, and ‘Basis of my Attitude’, p. 147. Both of these essays were produced in 1948.
terms, by humanity’s emerging consciousness of its decisive role in world history. Similarities with the earlier form of humanism may, nonetheless, be identified: above all, the challenges which both have presented to established religious institutions.

**Conversion of the World**

The first article I wish to discuss is ‘Some Reflexions on the Conversion of the World’, which Teilhard produced in 1936. He believes that the Church is ‘the instrument of salvation for all, and sent as a mission to the whole world’. In his conclusion to the article, he makes constructive suggestions for how the Church might orient itself towards the modern world in order to remain faithful to its mission to all people. The terms in which the question is presented are themselves suggestive. Teilhard considers that the mission of the Church to the world is made possible by the identity of the Church as essentially distinct from the world. He therefore begins by establishing a distinction between *reconciliation* to the modern world and *acceptance* of the modern world. He believes that, while the Church might have achieved the first, it has certainly not accomplished the second. There persists an abiding fear within the Church, he argues, of becoming committed (*s’engager, se donner*) to the modern world. Commitment by the Church to the world is necessary, Teilhard argues, in order to forge a new identity by a process of mutual conversion of world to Church, and Church to world. The Church remains afraid, however, of surrendering its self-identity to the world. Crucial to such a giving up would be the recognition of the immense quantity of goodness present in the world. Teilhard complains: ‘Still the talk goes on of the *mundus senescens* – “the ageing world” – the *mundus frigescens* – “the world growing cold” – never of the *mundus nascens* – “the nascent world”’. The Church’s verbal assent to some of the results and prospects of progress so often falls short of whole-hearted affirmation: ‘Sometimes she gives her blessing but her heart does not go with it.’ The Church too often only tolerates the world, and expends excessive time and energy lamenting the loss of past images, discourses, customs and language.

The consequence of this refusal to recognize the nascent quality of the world is ‘completely to paralyse the conversion of the world’. On the one hand, people outside the Church continue to regard it as insincere, because it fails to share in ‘their sufferings, their work, or their hopes’. Far from embracing and promoting scientific, technological and other development, the Church is more likely to be found challenging its methodology and conclusions. On the other hand, ‘the

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* *Lumen gentium*, § 9, in Tanner (ed.), *Decrees*, II, p. 856.

faithful inside the Church continue to feel ill at ease, caught as they are between their faith and their natural convictions or aspirations.

Teilhard discusses this perennial concern at length in *The Divine Milieu*. Here, he reflects on the adverse consequences of the tendency to value prayer and action in terms of the intention motivating them, rather than by the practical effects which they produce in the world. He continues:

You can convert only what you love: if the Christian is not fully in sympathy with the nascent world – if he does not experience in himself the anxieties and aspirations of the modern world – if he does not allow the sense of man to grow greater in his being – then he will never effect the emancipating synthesis between earth and heaven from which can emerge the parousia of the universal Christ. He will continue to fear and condemn almost indiscriminately everything that is new, without seeing among the blemishes and evils the hallowed efforts of something that is being born.

The Church’s mission will fail, Teilhard argues, unless the Church, and each of its members, loves the world. He perceives throughout his forty years of writing that the Church is dependent on love not only for its mission, but for its continued existence. He asks rhetorically:

Is it not a fact, and this I guarantee, that if the love of God were ever to be extinguished in the souls of the faithful, the enormous edifice of rites, hierarchy, and doctrines the Church represents would instantly fall back into the dust from which it came?

Authority, tradition, scripture or reason might, of course, form part of the context in which many particular acts of faith, in fact, occur. Nonetheless, religious commitment itself is not motivated by any of these positive elements of religion. On the contrary, it is the pure love of God, in and for itself, which inspires and sustains all religion.

In his early work, Teilhard identifies a ‘rift in charity’ (*caritas*) that has developed between the Church and the world. Natural love, rather than being offered to the

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11 ‘Some Reflexions’, p. 127.

Church, is being directed towards purely human activities. This rift has adverse consequences for both Church and world. The Church, for its part, is becoming deprived of the energy and devotion it needs in order to continue in existence. Conversely, the world lacks a directing focus which may gather up its natural aspirations and offer them to the transcendent principle at which they implicitly aim. Teilhard observes: ‘The religious aspirations of modern humanitarianism are distressingly vague and aimless.’ He nevertheless finds reasons for continuing to hope in the Church’s capacity for love. Just two months before his death, he writes: ‘It is indisputable that the most ardent collective focus of love ever to appear in the World is glowing *hic et nunc* (here and now) at the heart of the Church of God.’

Teilhard possesses an incarnational theology of the Church’s relation to the world. The Church exists for the world, and it is for love of the world that the Church has been born into the world. Following its birth, the Church is called to die to its own collective self and to gather up and sanctify worldly needs and aspirations, in a similar way to that in which Christ entered into the world in order to die and thereby to save it:

To plunge into in order then to emerge and raise up. To share in order to sublimate. This is precisely the law of the Incarnation.

Although the Church exists for the world in love, it is never *of* the world. The description of the Incarnation just cited is derived from an earlier account of the Baptism of Christ, which clarifies this point:

Christ immerses himself in the waters of Jordan, symbol of the energies of the earth. He sanctifies them. And as he emerges, says S. Gregory of Nyssa, he elevates the whole world with the water which runs off his body.

The baptism of Christ evidently cannot be understood in the same way as can human baptism. Christ did not seek baptism in order to have his sins forgiven, nor so that he might receive the Holy Spirit. Rather, as Gregory suggests, Christ represents in his baptism all those who will be baptized in his name. Christ therefore leads the way to baptism, and makes it possible for all who follow him to receive the Holy Spirit. The Church, being the body of Christ in the world, is therefore assigned the similar functions of immersing itself in the world and offering that world to the Father.

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17 ‘Some Reflexions’, p. 127.

Church, Matter and Spirit

Use of the baptism of Christ as a metaphor to describe the immersion of the Church in the world enables Teilhard to portray its mission in characteristically earthy and physical terms. The Church is called to gather up and to sanctify not only humanity but the whole material order. Teilhard’s concern with materiality can be identified in his early writings. The Church, as part of its mission to the world, will need to engage with the material element of that world. It already achieves this fairly well, Teilhard believes, by means of its traditional forms. He affirms:

In its dogmas and sacraments, the whole economy of the Church teaches us respect for matter and insists on its value. Christ wished to assume, and had to assume, a real flesh. He sanctifies human flesh by a specific contact. He makes ready, physically, its Resurrection. In the Christian concept, then, matter retains its cosmic role as the basis, lower in order but primordial and essential, of union; and, by assimilation to the Body of Christ, some part of matter is destined to pass into the foundations and walls of the heavenly Jerusalem.°

Matter is therefore transformed and spiritualized in order that it may share in the final end of the world: union with Christ and the spiritual vision of God. The sacramental transformation of matter is a continuing process and not a completed task.

To examine how this conversion occurs would require a separate essay. Two points can, however, be noted in the current one. First, Teilhard regards the transformation of matter effected in the eucharistic host as extending to the whole of material creation. It is not confined to the ecclesial sacrament itself. Matter as a whole becomes the object of the consecration that is inalienably exemplified in the host.° Second, the presence of Christ in the substance of the host, by which the host is preserved in unity, constitutes the exemplar for the presence of Christ in the world and the preservation of its composite substances. Christ is present not only in the host, but in all real composite substances in an analogous way. At the very least, it would seem that this attempt to situate a theory of eucharistic presence in the context of a general theory of the action of Christ on substances in the world might provide foundations for an ecumenical understanding of the nature of eucharistic substance.

A further, indirect consequence of the transformation of the materiality of the world is the diversity of ministries in the Church, both at one moment in time, and at different times. Teilhard employs a Neoplatonic ontology of being, according
to which the corollary of materiality is dispersal and diversity. God, by contrast, is ineffable, and is one. This means that any refusal to accept diversity within the Church amounts to a failure to recognize the fact that materiality is intrinsic to the human condition. Teilhard refers to a Church which accepts its materiality, and not just its spirituality, in the following terms:

It is probable that the Church has been led, at different times in the course of its existence, to emphasise in its general life, on some occasions, a greater care to collaborate in the earthly task, on others, a more jealous concern to stress the ultimate transcendence of its preoccupations. What is quite certain is that its health and integrity, at any given moment, depend upon the exactitude with which its members, each in their proper place, fulfil their functions which range from the duty of applying themselves to what are reputed to be the most profane of worldly occupations, to vocations which call for the most austere penances or the most sublime contemplation. All these roles are necessary. The Church is like a great tree whose roots must be energetically anchored in the earth while its leaves are serenely exposed to the bright sunlight. In this way at every moment it sums up [elle résume] a whole range of innumerable pulsations in a single living act of synthesis, each one of which corresponds to a particular degree or possible form of spiritualization.

The Church is thus called to unify the material and the spiritual orders by comprising, through time, some forms of faith in which the spiritual predominates, and others in which the material has priority. This is well-expressed in the analogy of the tree: the roots, trunk and leaves all need each other in order to survive and to grow. The analogy suggests, moreover, organic growth through time by means of the synthesis of essential material elements by the light of external revelation. The reference to summing up, or recapitulation, indicates the affinity of Teilhard’s theology of the Church with that of Irenaeus of Lyons. For both theologians, the Church is the body in which materiality encounters revelation, and is transformed by it. Sacred teaching therefore provides ‘the beginning, the middle, and the end’ of the divine economy and its operation for the salvation of humankind.

**The Church as Axis of Convergence**

So far, I have considered Teilhard’s ecclesiology in fairly conventional terms: incarnation, mission, conversion, sacraments. Teilhard’s vision of the Church is,

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22 See ‘The Struggle Against the Multitude’; in *Writings in Time of War*, pp. 93–114.
however, intimately connected with his theory of convergence. He believes the universe to be evolving from its current state of dispersal towards a final unity. This doctrine has sometimes been described as ‘cosmic convergence’, and has been widely disseminated and espoused by people with little or no interest in the ecclesial foundations of his thought.\textsuperscript{25} A secularized reading of Teilhard’s theory of convergence cannot, however, be sustained for two reasons. First, he clearly states that the movement of the world towards unity will only be completed by a consummation of the world by Christ.\textsuperscript{26} Secondly, and more pertinent to the present discussion, he believes that convergence is made possible only by the Church, which is ‘the central axis of universal convergence, and the exact meeting point that springs up between the universe and Omega Point’.\textsuperscript{27} Teilhard states: ‘If the Church is not to be false to herself . . . she cannot but regard herself as the very axis upon which the looked-for movement of concentration and convergence can, and must, be effected.’\textsuperscript{28} In the words of Xavier Tilliette, the Church is ‘the axis of the Christification of the universe’.\textsuperscript{29}

If the Church is to fulfil its function as the world’s axis of convergence, it needs, Teilhard argues, to be united. Only in its full, visible unity will the Church be able to promote social, political and spiritual unity among the peoples of the world. In 1944, he writes:

\begin{quote}
  If Christianity is in truth destined to be, as it professes, and as it is conscious of being, the religion of tomorrow, it is only through the living, organic axis of its Roman Catholicism that it can hope to measure up to the great modern humanist currents and become one with them.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Teilhard considers Catholicism, ‘in the cold strictness of its Catholic claims’ – which include its mystical tradition – to possess a unique and inalienable role in bringing

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item It is this interpretation that is subject to trenchant criticism in David H. Lane, \textit{The Phenomenon of Teilhard: Prophet for a New Age} (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).
\item This is affirmed with particular clarity in Teilhard’s final essay, ‘The Christic’, in \textit{Heart of Matter}, pp. 80–102.
\end{enumerate}
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the world to faith in Christ. He affirms: ‘To be a Catholic is the only way of being fully and completely Christian.’ Teilhard could have agreed with the following description of the Church by Henri de Lubac:

It is the meeting point of the divine world descending from God and the human world rising up to God. It bears within itself an irreducible duality, being oriented both towards God and towards the world. It reflects the mystery of Christ, and is called to unify the whole world in Christ.

Teilhard does not wish to defend the unique place of Catholicism for purely dogmatic reasons. The focal position of Rome derives, by contrast, from the fact that the unique ministry of unification that it claims for itself is expressed in its theology and lived out in its ordering and sacramental worship.

Teilhard’s belief that a unique deposit of faith is present in Catholic Christianity is confirmed during his visit to Rome in 1948. He describes ‘the extraordinary focus of spiritual radiation concentrated by the two thousand years of history these places have witnessed’, and affirms: ‘In these days, it is here in Rome that we find the Christic pole of the earth.’ He remarks:

The Eternal City has made no violent impact on me … but I have been impressed (and heartened) by Christianity’s extraordinary, really imperturbable, confidence in the unshakable solidity of its faith and truth. There is a remarkable phenomenon there, unique, in fact, in the world.

Teilhard’s previous descriptions of the power and energy present in Catholic Christianity are thus confirmed by his personal testimony of its focal place.

This experience can be contrasted with another on a visit to Canterbury Cathedral over thirty years earlier. Teilhard served part of his tertianship at St Mary’s College, the house of the French Jesuits in exile in the city, and so visited the Cathedral on many occasions, as was the custom of college members and visitors.

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During an earlier visit to the city from Hastings, he describes sitting in the nave during matins. His attention is absorbed by Anglican ecclesiastical dress, and he is struck with wonder during the singing and music. He does not, however, appear to have experienced the type of ‘spiritual radiation’ in Canterbury that he would later discover in Rome.

It should, by now, be clear that Teilhard’s metaphysical philosophy of convergence both makes room for, and necessitates, the Church. First, his philosophy establishes certain ‘preambles of faith’ which are preparatory to, and subsequently confirmed by, revelation. His philosophical work is, however, focused on different concerns from those of the medieval preambles. Teilhard does not feel the need to establish the existence of the soul, and the free will of the individual human person. These are no longer the objects of serious questioning that they were in the medieval era. More pressing for him are topics related to the constitution of the world: its materiality, its spirituality, and, above all, its telos. Secondly, metaphysics can be put to apologetic use. In a letter written in response to a critique of one of his essays by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Teilhard refers to his desire to establish ‘causes of credibility’ for Christian belief. He is acutely aware of living during an age in which, as the Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions states, ‘the human race is being daily brought closer together and contacts between the various nations are becoming more frequent’. Consequent on this is a need to consider ‘what things human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together’. Teilhard employs philosophy in preambles and apologetics. He did not wish, at any point in his life, to establish a philosophical religion in the tradition of Plato, Spinoza and Hume. He states in his letter: ‘The act of theological faith is not denied, for it has not yet come up for consideration.’

This analysis directly challenges caricatures of Teilhard portraying him as an advocate of a post-Christian, global religion. If this designation is understood to mean that the claim of historic Christianity to have been given a uniquely true revelation is no longer valid, and that the future for people of faith lies in a single generic religion which subsumes within it the specific truth claims of the various particular religions, then nothing could be further from Teilhard’s actual view. His metaphysics is one not of confluence, but of convergence. One can even find resonances in his work of statements contained in later magisterial teaching about the Church; not only in prolegomena, but in doctrine too. *Ut unum sint* affirms, for instance, that ‘the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church’ in which is contained ‘the fullness of the means of salvation’, and that ‘the communion of the particular Churches with the Church of Rome, and of their Bishops with

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37 *Nostra aetate*, § 1, in Tanner (ed.), *Decrees*, II, p. 968.
the Bishop of Rome, is – in God’s plan – an essential requisite of full and visible communion’.  

Teilhard’s ecclesiology provides the best perspective from which to account for his frequently critical remarks about non-Christian religions.  

Ursula King refers to ‘his sometimes ill-informed and rash judgements’.  

His low estimation of other religions could, at a psychological level, be attributed to a lack of knowledge of their true characteristics, a concern for the individuality of the person and the reality of the phenomenal realm, a failure to distinguish religion from culture, specific negative experiences, or a Eurocentric perspective. Teilhard’s critical assessment of faiths other than his own could, more pertinently, be regarded as being in tension with his theory of convergence. He certainly does not seek to foster religious convergence by means of ongoing conversation, in the way that Hans Küng has done. The claim that Teilhard’s assessments of other religions are incompatible with his theory of convergence would rest, however, on a misunderstanding of that theory. On the contrary, as Ursula King states, ‘Convergence always occurs around a specific axis which denotes the overall direction of future developments’, and ‘true convergence means the presence of an overall orientation, an axis along which certain developments of major importance occur’.  

A full account needs to go beyond these statements, however, and identify the axis by name: by its very nature, it must be a physical entity and not just an abstract principle. The fundamental reason for Teilhard’s frequent unsympathetic assessments of other religions is, simply, that they do not constitute this axis. It needs to stated unambiguously that, in Teilhard’s theology, the axis of convergence is the Church centred on Rome.

Conversion of the Church

Whilst clearly affirming that Catholicism centred on Rome constitutes, in principle, the future for the mission of the Church, Teilhard expresses concern that this form of the Christian religion is not currently fulfilling its calling to universality. In commenting on a recent study of the relation of the Church to contemporary


In the non-Roman branches of Christianity a spirit of religious invention is finally manifesting itself which is the sole possible agent of a true ecumenism: not the sterile and conservative ecumenism of a ‘common ground’ but the creative ecumenism of a ‘convergence’ ... on to a common ideal.\textsuperscript{42}

Theologians in Rome, Teilhard had suggested in a previous letter, were not facilitating this convergence.\textsuperscript{43} In a much earlier essay, he affirms that progress towards greater visible unity in the Church, and the conversion of those who do not currently confess the name of Christ, requires, above all, the conversion of the Church. By this he means, of course, the conversion of Catholicism centred on Rome. There is a need for the Church to ‘look for her God as though she might lose him’.\textsuperscript{44} He believes that the world will never be converted to Christianity’s hopes of heaven, unless Christianity is first converted to the hopes of the earth.

The corollary of Teilhard’s conception of the Church as constituting the axis of convergence of the world is his awareness of the provisionality of the Church. Gathering up and sanctifying the elements of a dispersed world, the Church necessarily shares in the imperfection and contingency of that world. Convergence is a process of becoming which is clearly far from ready for its completion by Christ. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church also affirms that the perfection of the Church lies solely in the future: “The church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus and in which through the grace of God we attain sanctity, will reach its completion only in the glory of heaven, when the time for the restoration of all things will come.”\textsuperscript{45} This suggests the need for a nuanced conception of ecclesial inerrancy. Christopher Mooney summarizes Teilhard’s understanding of the infallibility of the Church in the following pertinent terms: “To say that the Church is infallible is simply to recognise that it possesses what any living phylum possesses, namely the capacity to find its way through innumerable gropings towards maturity and fulfilment.”\textsuperscript{46}

Teilhard suggests that part of the Church’s conversion to the world would consist in an increased awareness of the extent to which prayer and spiritual sense unite


\textsuperscript{43} Letter of 1950 cited in King, \textit{Towards a New Mysticism}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{44} ‘Note on the Presentation of the Gospel in a New Age’ (1919), in \textit{Heart of Matter}, p. 218 (italics in original).


\textsuperscript{46} Mooney, \textit{Teilhard}, pp. 158–59.
people of different faiths. He describes the existence of two categories of believers ‘cutting across the existing religions’. These believers are distinguished by the extent to which they possess a sense of the numinous. A Christian with a heightened mystical awareness might, for instance, identify with this aspect of Sufism and Tantric Hinduism more than with other modes of prayer within his or her own religion. Similarities can be identified between this distinction of mystical and non-mystical and the one drawn by Henri Bergson between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ religion. Bergson does not, after all, apply his categories solely to Christianity. He provides a detailed analysis of the regenerative property of mysticism, which is inherent in ‘dynamic’ religion, wherever it may be found. The moral status of good persons and beautiful objects endows them with a real religious value.

The fact remains, however, that non-Catholic Christians are not participating in the sacrament of unity that is the Catholic Church. Teilhard states:

> There are, no doubt, many individuals outside Catholicism who recognise and love Christ, and are therefore united to him, as much as (and even more than) some Catholics. But these individuals are not grouped together in the ‘cephalised’ unity of a body which reacts vitally, as an organic whole, to the combined forces of Christ and mankind.

This description of the church as ‘cephalised’, in other words, as grounded in a firm, rock-like foundation, would have held particular significance for Teilhard, due to his abiding appreciation for materiality and geology.

**Obedience**

The corollary of Teilhard’s theory of convergence by conversion to Catholicism centred on Rome was, during his own lifetime, his personal obedience to the authorities of the institutions of which he was a member: not only the Curia, but the Gésu as well. This is manifested at several key decision points in Teilhard’s life: his departure from France in 1902 during the expulsion of religious communities.

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50 ‘Introduction to the Christian Life’ (1944), in *Christianity and Evolution*, p. 168.
51 For background, see Patrick Cabanel, ‘Le grand exil des congrégations enseignantes au début du xxe siècle’, *Revue d’Histoire de l’Église de France* 81 (1995), pp. 207–17. Awareness of this episode challenges the frequently voiced opinion that the academic and religious vocations within the Church imply a retreat from politics and other aspects of ‘real life’. The Waldeck-Rousseau and Combes legislation in fact turned the teaching orders into the most highly politicized part of the French Church. Cabanel suggests, moreover, that the exile which they precipitated served as a prelude for the Vichy expulsions.
his exile to China following official investigation of his writings on the doctrine of original sin,52 and his acceptance of decisions that none of his mature theological works be published.53 He explains the reasons for his obedience in a remarkable short essay, ‘On My Attitude to the Official Church’:

The more I become aware of certain failures on the part of the Church to adapt herself, of a loss of her vitality (to which I shall return later), the more I recognize how incompetent I am and how ill-qualified to take it upon myself to give a definitive appreciation of her in her general or, if you would prefer the word, her axial character. The Church represents so powerful a channelling of what constitutes the moral and ‘sublimating’ life-blood of souls, a conduit dug so deep into the whole of man’s past – in spite of certain accidental and ephemeral lapses from generosity, she has to so marked a degree the faculty of encouraging human nature to develop itself fully and harmoniously, that I would feel guilty of disloyalty to Life if I tried to free myself from so organic a current as the Church provides.54

Despite its faults, the Church is the ‘most perfect approximation’ to the truth available to humanity. This is because it preserves a dynamic, living tradition which it hands on from one generation to the next. Ecclesial tradition does not provide a perfect revelation of truth at any particular moment in time:

The Church possesses and transmits from century to century a view of Christ – an experience of Christ, a way of living Christ – whose definitive form, and whose richness, she is unable at any given moment to express completely.55

The present imperfection of the Church is well-suited, Teilhard suggests, to the imperfect state of human nature as currently constituted. If the Church is to exist with integrity, it must recognize its imperfection.

Teilhard affirms that the life and knowledge of Christ are part of the deposit of the whole Church, both priests and laity, of all ages. Just as the Church at any particular moment in time neither fully lives the life of Christ, nor possesses perfect knowledge of Christ, so this life and this knowledge cannot be regarded as

54 ‘On My Attitude to the Official Church’, in Heart of Matter, pp. 115–18.
the possession of any particular ministry of the Church. All Christians are called
to share in the task of interpreting the gospel. The inclusive nature of this work
will obviously be a determining influence on the hermeneutic which it employs.
One respected exponent of Teilhard’s thought has referred to ‘the development
of the fundamental and immutable content of the Christian message, through its
intellectual unfolding, under the action of the Spirit, who animates and nourishes
the Church’s consciousness’.56 ‘Intellectual’ might, however, permit a misleading
conception of the development. Teilhard complains that dogma ‘is still explained
by some theologians in terms of a narrowing, naively intellectualist theory. In
their view Dogma evolves simply by rational analysis of the formulas in which it
is expressed.’ The implication of this theory of dogma, he critically continues, is
that a ‘sufficiently penetrating intelligence’ would be able ‘to unravel Dogma and
exhaust its meaning’. Teilhard argues, by contrast, that dogma cannot ultimately be
constituted by demonstrative reasoning:

Dogma evolves in accordance with a much more complex logic, much slower,
much richer, than that of concepts. It evolves as a man does: he is the same at the
age of forty as he was at the age of ten but his shape at forty cannot be deduced
from what it was at ten. The Church changes in the same way: she has a certain
identity, but it is the identity of a person, of an organism; and it does not exclude
– on the contrary it presupposes – a framework of truths that can be expressed
in formulae. They can practically all be reduced to this single one: Christ is
the physical centre of the gathering together of souls in God. These formulae,
however, express an invariable aspect of truth which will necessarily assume a
continually new aspect according as man becomes more conscious of his past
and of his environment.57

Teilhard does not, unfortunately, pursue this analysis to consider the relationship
between truth and the formulae which express it. Nevertheless, from the fact that
the dogmatic teaching of the Church embodies, at any particular time, only an imperfect
understanding of truth, it does not follow that the Christian is free from obedience
to that dogmatic teaching. Individuals might be able to gain greater conceptual
understanding of theology, for instance, by withdrawing from the Church and living
as anonymous or implicit Christians. In making this decision they would, however,
no longer be participating in the life of the Church – its worship, sacraments,
festivals and fellowship – in which dogma truly consists. Teilhard is convinced of the
importance of living with the Church, and of living within it.

A final word on the subject of obedience concerns circumstances where there
appear to be conflicting loyalties. To which portion of the Church is obedience
owed in such cases? A helpful distinction to employ in considering this question

56 Rideau, Teilhard, p. 179 (original italics).
57 ‘On My Attitude’, p. 117.

is the one made by Henri de Lubac between ‘particular’ churches and ‘local’ churches. De Lubac defines *particular* churches as those ones whose identity is dependent upon and forms part of that of the single, universal Church. The *local* church comprises, De Lubac states, a group of particular churches which share specific social or cultural elements. The local church, therefore, remains dependent for its identity on the universal Church.

Teilhard would be in complete agreement with De Lubac on the particularity of churches. It seems important to restate this conception of ecclesial identity in contexts in which the prospects for Church growth are perceived to lie in the fostering of local identity at the expense of particularity and, therefore, in opposition to universality. In some places, the privileging of local identity is promoted by a desire to sustain historic parish systems defined by geographical territory, which in turn comprise the principal locus of worship, membership and mission. This is sometimes bound up with an assumption that postmodern social theory possesses normative status. The suggestion has been made, for instance, that theology needs to emerge from intersubjectivity within ‘local churches’, rather than be the gift of a teacher ‘travelling in from afar’.

One might respond that welcoming a visiting theologian has the potential to provide a better approach to learning and ecclesial hospitality than completing a standard course or surfing the Internet would be likely to achieve. In any case, Teilhard provides a more challenging model for future ecclesial identity than that of locality. He correctly perceives that, in the contemporary world, identity is frequently construed as participation by the individual in a *much* greater whole. Mobility within and between nations, and forms of non-geographical identity, are omnipresent in ordinary life as never before, and Teilhard is a prophet of these developments. By virtue of its missionary imperative, the Church is called with urgency to preserve its own, corresponding, universal identity, and to foster its further development. Significant progress towards this end has already been made. For instance, the capacity of the Catholic Church to make use of international news media in its mission, after it had identified the task as one of sufficient importance to merit conciliar deliberation, has become one of the outstanding successes of Christianity in the modern world. The mission of all churches is likely to benefit from being situated as part of this mission of the universal Church.

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61 In Britain, the ability of cathedrals to draw increasing numbers of worshippers and supporters may be seen as a microcosm of this development.

Conclusion

It is not sufficiently recognized that a coherent and convincing ecclesiology emerges from the cosmology and theology of Teilhard de Chardin. The Church has criticized opinions attributed to Teilhard on several occasions when, in fact, most of the theories he actually develops about the Church are profoundly orthodox and of significant apologetic value. Above all, they are appropriately creative, and challenge conceptions of ecclesiology as a discipline primarily concerned with questions of internal order. Genuine ecclesiology, Teilhard believes, can only be pursued if conceived in the context of mission to the world.

This mission can have no purpose unless the Church maintains its distinctive, universal identity as the Church of Christ. Introspective projects which focus on amending the internal administration of churches frequently fail to achieve this. Much time and energy can be expended on the development and application of new membership and leadership models, the definition of ‘strengths’ and ‘weaknesses’ and reflection on them, vocational discernment, ‘theological’ and ‘pre-theological education’, identification and pursuit of training objectives, ‘ministerial deployment’, the undertaking and description of ‘spiritual journeys’, and so on. These sometimes appear more as missions by the world to the Church, than of the Church to the world. Teilhard’s silence on matters of internal church ordering is suggestive, especially in light of his radical analysis of social change. He believes that the existing ordering of the Church is more or less right, and that the work of the Church is most likely to be renewed by a continual return to the fundamental data of faith, without the need for radical changes to ecclesial structures. The essential works of the Church in which Christ acts will always remain the same: prayer, baptism, eucharist, action, passion, the vision of God. It is solely in these that Christ is made present to the world, and solely in these that the world is brought closer to Christ.

Notwithstanding his high doctrine of the authority and ministry of the Church centred on Rome, Teilhard emphatically regards the Christian missionary and ecumenical ventures as ones which call for self-questioning by all participants. The Church is called to embrace its provisionality, and the fact that it exists both for the world and for Christ. Indeed, its sacramental action unavoidably sanctifies the wider world. The work of the Church thereby becomes a public possession which eludes any attempt at comprehensive dogmatic expression.

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Article Review

The Conciliar Tradition in the Western Church, from the Eve of the Great Schism to the Vatican Councils

PAUL AVIS


The ideas discussed in this book, though very old, are enormously relevant to the churches at this point in their fortunes. Francis Oakley has produced a series of books and research articles about conciliarism, both its history and its political philosophy, over the past forty years, since Vatican II in fact. Here he harvests and distils his life's work. He believes that the Roman Catholic Church needs to rediscover, to re-appropriate the conciliar tradition – a part of its history that it has suppressed for centuries (he dubs this ‘the repression of memory and the pursuit of the politics of oblivion’) – in order to reform its practice of authority. In particular, conciliar principles can counteract Vatican centralization under the monarchical papacy of modern times.

But to raise the subject of the conciliar movement does not make for polite conversation in the Roman Catholic Church. After seven centuries, that church has not fully come to terms with the events that comprised the Great Schism of the West and its ultimate resolution through the initiative of a General Council acting without – and in defiance of – the pope. When Hans Küng recovered and promoted conciliar theology, focusing on the Council of Constance, in his Structures of the Church during Vatican II, he got seriously into hot water for the first time. For this reason, some writers distinguish between ‘conciliar’ and ‘conciliarist’: making a difference between acceptable ideas of episcopal collegiality, consulting the laity and the role of councils normally under the presidency of the pope, on the one hand, and subversive views that would make the papacy the permanent servant of...
frequent General Councils which would effectively run the Church, on the other. The fascination of the conciliar(ist) tradition is that it shows that matters are not as simple as that. The question of where supreme authority in the Church on earth ultimately lies is of critical ecumenical importance.

What Oakley inevitably does not document, because it does not fall within the scope of this book, is the extent to which the conciliar tradition has also significantly shaped the Protestant churches that emerged from the Reformation. Conciliar influences on Protestantism are mentioned only in passing by Oakley: Luther appealing to Council, a paragraph on Hooker, nothing on Calvin. The polities of Protestant churches, with constitutional roles and responsibilities for lay people and their systems of interlocking synods or courts, are a one-sided development of conciliar ideas. The Anglican polity of the bishop in synod reflects (though this is not generally recognized, even by Anglicans) conciliar ideas in a rather less one-sided way. What is missing in both Protestant and Anglican expressions of conciliarity is, of course, the universal primacy (of some sort – of what sort was precisely the central issue that conciliarism grappled with) of the Bishop of Rome and the role of the papacy as an institution. The conciliar tradition was an ongoing, unresolved debate about the relation of the authority of the pope to that of the episcopate and of the universal Church in its dispersed existence. The conciliar tradition belongs to the Christian Church as a whole, not just to the Roman Catholic Church which has in fact largely disowned it, at least overtly.

The central conviction of conciliarism is that responsibility for the doctrine, worship and mission of the Church rests with the whole Church and that this responsibility is exercised in a constitutional and representative way through councils, supremely through a General Council. Conciliarism brought the ecclesiological work of theologians to bear on oppressive legal and administrative systems. It recognized national aspirations and brought civil rulers and non-episcopal scholars into its deliberations. It appealed to the common good of the Church, elevating the well-being of the whole over that of the constituent parts, and infused the practice of authority with ideas drawn from the tradition of natural law, particularly equity (aequitas) and flexibility in the administration of positive, human law (epikeia). None of that made it a movement towards democratic church government, though the seeds of democracy were present in Marsilius of Padua’s *Defensor Pacis*. Conciliarism remained hierarchical and hierocratic – especially in Jean Gerson, one of its most impressive exponents – an assertion of the principle of aristocracy over against the principle of monarchy. For the high conciliarists, just as much as for the publicists of papal monarchy, the Church was a societas perfecta, a complete and self-sufficient community. General Councils not only had supreme authority, emulating the plenitude potestatis claimed by the late medieval papacy, but could not err in matters of faith. However, conciliarism was not an abstract political or theological theory, but arose from a particular historical crisis.
Conciliar theory had early medieval origins, especially in the debates of canon lawyers on what to do about an heretical or otherwise errant pope. As Brian Tierney decisively showed, conciliarism was not in conflict with the canon law tradition, but derived from it. However, conciliar ideas came into their own after the Great Schism of 1378 which threw Christendom into an unprecedented trauma and was insoluble within the existing structures. The college of cardinals, regretting their recent choice of pope (Urban VI), with his irrational behaviour and violent temper, elected a second pope (Clement VII), but the first refused to concede. The fact that the same college of cardinals had canonically elected two popes sent a shock wave through Christendom. It resulted in a dual system of popes, cardinals, curia and ecclesiastical allegiances, right down to the parochial clergy, as each side anathematized the other. The almost metaphysical vertigo induced in many responsible churchmen by this implosion of the pivotal medieval principle of unity can scarcely be imagined at this cultural distance.

Although, as it turned out, only a General Council was able successfully to unite the Church, this idea gained ground only gradually. A new constitutional instrument that would enable a Council to be convened without the normal authority of the pope was urgently needed. The first true conciliarists began to invoke the ancient adage that what affects all should be approved by all (a principle of universal consultation and consent), and to apply it to the resolution of the schism. The premise of the leading conciliar thinkers (Dietrich of Niem, Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson and Nicholas of Cusa) was that the sacred institution itself had failed. The very office (that of the papacy) that was intended to maintain the Church’s unity had become the cause of its fragmentation. As d’Ailly put it: ‘A community is not sufficiently ordered if it cannot resist its own ruin.’ It was the intransigence of the rival popes that fused the longing for unity with the age-long desire for structural reform.

The first attempt to unite the papacy, at the Council of Pisa (1409), exacerbated the problem when it merely succeeded in adding a third pope to the two who refused to step down. The papacy was reunited by the Council of Constance in 1417 when it deposed three popes and elected a fourth (Martin V). Constance attempted to perpetuate councils as the normal mode of governance in the Church, of which the pope would be the chief minister. At the Council of Basle (1431–49) the conciliarists over-reached themselves, lost crucial support from leading figures such as Nicholas of Cusa, and were tactically out-manoeuvred by the pope (Eugenius IV). Appeals to a General Council against the pope were subsequently outlawed and reform was resisted for a century, until Trent, when it was too late to prevent the breakup of the western Church. The Reformation can be seen as an exposition of pent-up conciliar, reforming energy. It was the execution of John Hus at Constance a century before that caused Luther to question the infallibility of councils. From that moment of truth for Luther it was a comparatively short step to challenging the infallibility of...
the pope (then, of course, not a formal dogma but an assertion on the part of the papalists and a contestable opinion as far as some theologians were concerned). The minds of the Reformers were seared, with respect to councils, by the betrayal of Hus, but they remained at least critical conciliarists. No one sympathetic to the conciliarist tradition can forget that it was the conciliarists Dietrich of Niem, Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson who were the prime movers in the condemnation of Hus on false charges and in the face of a guarantee of safe conduct.

Oakley takes the story of the conciliar tradition up to the First Vatican Council (1870–71), which he clearly regards as the remotest point from classic conciliar ideals. Vatican I represented, in his view, the ultimate defeat of conciliar, constitutional aspirations by monarchical absolutism. As Sergei Bulgakov once said, the bishops at Vatican I committed collective suicide. However, recent Roman Catholic scholarship (notably the work of Hermann J. Pottmeyer) has endeavoured to show that, properly interpreted, Pastor aeternus implies the conciliar principle of episcopal collegiality and therefore excludes the sort of absolute papal monarchy that conciliarists attack. Thus it is claimed that the seeds of the Second Vatican Council were sown at the First. Vatican II was the continuation and completion of Vatican I, not simply its antidote and corrective. While that intriguing piece of historical apologetic may smooth over the discontinuities and tensions rather too easily, it sharpens the moral suggested by Oakley’s narrative: the debate over the relative strengths of various centres of authority in the Church remains unresolved. It remains unresolved not only in Roman Catholicism, but in Anglicanism and in the historic Protestant churches. The existence of the Eastern Churches calls into question the very notion of a General Council on which the whole problematic pivots. There has not been a truly Ecumenical Council since before the decisive break between East and West in the mid-eleventh century. To admit, as Pope Paul VI did, that Councils of the Catholic Church are General rather than Ecumenical is to beg the question, though for the best of motives.

Conciliarity is fragmented and inchoate; it is not a panacea for the divisions of Christendom but an expression of them. Conciliarity is imperative and belongs to the essential life of the Church, but it is compromised, flawed, imperfect and ambiguous. All Christian churches are in the same boat with regard to conciliarity: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant. Each separated church attempts to practise conciliarity according to its lights, but separated acts of conciliarity are counter-productive because the conciliar principle stands precisely for the involvement of the whole Church. Conciliarity can only be pursued in an ecumenical way.

The entire historical continuum, comprising the medieval struggles between popes and emperors and popes and popes, the conciliar movement, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, the Vatican Councils and the ecumenical movement, belongs within the Western Church. The debate over authority is an internal one, a
family affair – that is why it has often been so impassioned, so inflamed. If Ockham belongs to the Western Church, so does Luther; if Gerson does, so does Calvin; if Cusanus does, so does Hooker. Issues of authority in the churches today look rather different from the perspective of the conciliar movement. Oakley's book is the best single, comprehensive resource in English for the history of conciliarism. For critical application of the conciliar heritage to ecclesiology today the field is wide open.

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Article Review

Vatican II After Forty Years

PAUL McPARTLAN


The dismissal is not an appendage to the Eucharist. This becomes clear when we realize that the Latin words of dismissal, *Ite missa est*, have actually given the Eucharist one of its names: ‘the Mass’. This odd fact of liturgical history makes us realize that the community gathers precisely so as to be strengthened by word and sacrament for its mission. Likewise, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, is not, as is often thought, something of an appendage to the Council. On the contrary, as Pope John Paul II wrote when he was Archbishop of Cracow, *Gaudium et Spes* ‘reveals what the Church essentially is’. ‘The redemptive work of Jesus Christ which determines the inmost nature of the Church is in fact the work of the redemption of the world’ (*Sources of Renewal* [London: Collins, 1980], p. 69). In other words, the agenda for the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the document which deals with the Church’s inmost nature, and the document that normally comes first to mind when thinking about Vatican II and its teaching on the Church, is actually set by *Gaudium et Spes*, the foundational document on the Church’s outreach to the world of today.

One of the strengths of this valuable collection of essays is the high profile it gives to *Gaudium et Spes*. There is no danger that the reader will miss its crucial importance. This healthy feature is partly determined by the nature of the book, which marks the retirement of John Wilkins, the editor of the London Catholic weekly journal, *The Tablet*. In his Introduction, *The Tablet’s* deputy editor and the editor of this volume, Austen Ivereigh, speaks of the famous opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*, as ‘great favourites of John’s, and implicitly a charter for *The Tablet* under his editorship’: ‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.’

Near the end of the book, in a moving tribute to Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador gunned down in 1980 for his defence of the poor and his demand that the government and the army stop their repression, Julian Filochowski calls...
Romero ‘a Gaudium et Spes bishop in a feudal society’. He preached and practised evangelical solidarity with the poor and Filochowski closes by praising The Tablet for having championed the Christian cause of ‘globalising compassion and globalising solidarity’. In theological terms, ‘solidarity’ is ‘communion’, and it is in order to minister God’s own life of communion to the world that the Church itself is a communion. Considerations of mission lead to considerations about the Church: once again, Gaudium et Spes leads to Lumen Gentium, and it is notable that most of the chapters of this book that are not linked one way or another to Gaudium et Spes touch at some point upon the theme of communion.

This heavily ecclesiological accent means that the book gives a rather uneven coverage of Vatican II. There is little reference to the Council’s other two ground-breaking constitutions, Dei Verbum on Revelation and Sacrosanctum Concilium on the Liturgy. Perhaps understandably, in context, there is attention to what the Council said about the media, with two essays being devoted to the decree on the means of social communication that Alain Woodrow frankly admits was ‘the least satisfactory of all the conciliar documents’, yet there is nothing, surprisingly, on ecumenism. The nature of the essays is itself somewhat variable, from the scholarly and stimulating (in most cases) to the rather anecdotal (once or twice).

Filochowski’s essay, together with an interesting and informative account by Margaret Hebblethwaite of the origin of base communities in the agrarian leagues of Paraguay and a very thoughtful reflection by Thomas Fox entitled, ‘A Lead from Asia’, in which he asks how the Church at large will come see ‘the place of the Holy Spirit in the wider world’ (another Gaudium et Spes theme), all appear in the third part of this collection, under the heading of ‘Signposts from Afar’. These signposts play a vital role in preventing the focus of the book from being too European or North American. After all, as Nicholas Lash rightly highlights in his opening essay, Vatican II was the council which, in Karl Rahner’s words, marked ‘the beginning of a tentative approach by the Church to the discovery and realisation of itself as world-Church’; a new phase of history has begun ‘in which the Church’s living space is from the very outset the whole world’. We need to realize that, while for instance Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter of 1968 on birth control, Humanae Vitae, precipitated what Lash calls ‘the contemporary crisis of authority in the Church’, from an Eastern perspective, it was the same pope’s remarkable encyclical letter of 1967 on the development of peoples, Populorum Progressio, that was ‘the defining point of his pontificate’. Fox tells us that, for ‘a host of reasons, Humanae vitae never had a major impact in Asia’.

There are three fine essays in the opening section, ‘Taking Stock’, setting the Council in a historical context. Lash raises a point that keeps recurring throughout the book as a sort of index of recent change, namely that in the early nineteenth century the vast majority of Catholic bishops were appointed by the State and hardly any by the pope, whereas the 1917 Code of Canon Law claimed for the pope...
the right to appoint bishops. He argues that the very recent centralization of power that this fact well illustrates needs to be counteracted by a serious implementation of Vatican II’s doctrine of episcopal collegiality, in order to promote a true sense of koinonia in the worldwide Church. In doing so, he raises the fundamental underlying issue of the place of reform in the ongoing life of the Church and rejects the simplistic politicizing that would see aggiornamento (‘updating’, a key Vatican II word) as a ‘liberal impulse’ and ressourcement (‘return to the sources’, a hallmark of the Council’s leading pioneers) as a ‘conservative’ one. With a sure feel for the pulse of the Church, he says: ‘ressourcement is not an alternative to aggiornamento, but the means of its achievement’.

In the vigorous and visionary following essay, Michael Novak refers to communion as ‘the inner tendency of creation’ and to the Church as ‘the forerunner of human destiny’, with the calling to model and to build ‘a civilisation of friendship’. This is what Vatican II was really about, he says, and Pope John Paul II has reinstated these grand perspectives and championed this great cause after considerable post-Vatican II confusion. With a historian’s contextualizing eye, Eamon Duffy gives a perceptive analysis of the visible decline of the Catholic Church since Vatican II and also launches a telling attack on the traditionalism that has little to do with tradition and everything to do with authority, as starkly evidenced by Pope Pius IX’s ‘notorious 1870 aphorism,’I am the tradition’! The pioneers of Vatican II, such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, laboured to rediscover the tradition in all its richness (the lamentable lack of an index in this book may be noted at this point), and Duffy passionately argues that ‘a sense of identity cannot be supplied by the exercise of authority’. ‘A common mind and heart come from the shared exploration of a common inheritance, and the shared pursuit of a common hope’.

The essays in the large middle section of the book, entitled, ‘The Unfinished Journey’, concentrate in the main on some particular themes of the Council and pursue the story into the post-conciliar era. There are two cris de coeur, one from Hans Küng for more courage within the Church itself, with people (bishops especially) standing up to be counted; the other from Joan Chittister on behalf of women: ‘Wanted: The Other Half of the Church’. There is a very useful survey by Archbishop Rembert Weakland of the images of the Church used from the nineteenth century, which favoured the idea of a ‘perfect society’, to Vatican II, with its prominent model of the ‘people of God’. Weakland heeds the growing use of the idea of ‘communion’ since the Council and also in ecumenical dialogue, but raises an important pastoral point when he says that it remains a rather theological term with ‘no adequate image to accompany it’; hence, it has not gained widespread popular usage. ‘People of God’ remains his own favourite, both because it gives scope for discussing ‘the sinfulness of the Church’ and also because it evokes a sense of pilgrimage and enables the Church to relate to the world as ‘a companion on the journey’, sharing the hopes and anxieties of the people of today and ministering hope.
Three stimulating essays pursue important issues arising directly from *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, religious freedom, to the defence of which the Council devoted a further specific document, *Dignitatis Humanae*, social teaching; and the nature of human identity and personhood. Michael Walsh tells the remarkable tale of the genesis of *Dignitatis Humanae*, with an illuminating contrast between the stances of American and Spanish bishops on the topic, and asks the teasing question as to whether the arguments of the American pioneer of the document, John Courtney Murray, have in fact contributed to a growing secularism in the USA. Clifford Longley’s essay nicely accompanies Walsh’s, with further consideration of *Dignitatis Humanae* and a probing discussion of what he accurately highlights as ‘one of the thorniest constitutional issues of the modern age, namely how to organise the government of a secular society without making it aggressively “secularist” and therefore anti-religious’. John Cornwell impressively tackles ‘The Scientific Search for the Soul’, guiding the layman through complex territory and asking to what extent new brain science can help us to understand that the human being, though made up of body and soul, is a unity and is also a social being, as *Gaudium et Spes* taught. Beware of ‘facile attempts at theoretical closure’, he warns; there is more to us than some theoreticians would have us believe. Thanks to Nicholas Lash, he quotes the Indian theologian Felix Wilfred: ‘Defining the human is not and cannot be the prerogative of one civilisation or one people’, a sentiment which profoundly resonates with the acknowledgement by *Gaudium et Spes* that the Church both aids the world and benefits from it.

I have kept what seems to me the best till last. Given that so much in this collection relates to *Gaudium et Spes*, one would hope that that text itself receives a worthy treatment, and it does, at the hands of Joseph Komonchak. Moreover, Komonchak’s splendid analysis of the split among the progressive majority at Vatican II, which was particularly acute with regard to the attitude with which the Church should engage the modern world, is wonderfully complemented by Timothy Radcliffe’s subtle study of ‘Power and Powerlessness in the Church’. To what extent can the world be affirmed and its instincts trusted and to what extent must it be confronted with the Cross and simply called to conversion? Christianity has known many positions on the spectrum between these extremes. Komonchak invokes David Tracy’s distinction between ‘a correlation-theology, the contemporary equivalent of Aquinas’s engagement with Aristotle’, and ‘epiphanic theology, the contemporary equivalent of a more Augustinian and Bonaventuran approach’, and he aligns Chenu, Congar, Rahner and Lonergan with the former and de Lubac, Bouyer, Ratzinger and von Balthasar with the latter. Fascinatingly, he observes that the pioneers of *ressourcement*, who in fact drew primarily from different sources, Thomist or patristic, as just indicated, fared differently after the Council. Those of a patristic inclination were much more critical of developments in the Church, while the Thomists were much more sanguine and nuanced.
Radcliffe, a former Master of the Dominicans, obviously speaks for the Thomist party and masterfully negotiates this terrain. With the balance of a historical perspective, he observes that: ‘Our beloved Mother Church as we know her today, with the power structures that shape her, is the fruit of two millennia of inculturation and counter-culturation.’ ‘Of course’, he adds, ‘one person’s inculturation is another person’s betrayal; and one person’s counter-culture is for a third unrealism.’ He highlights some of the most contested features of the modern Catholic Church, ‘a centralised institution in the Vatican; the naming of bishops by Rome; and a celibate clergy’, and says that they all ‘evolved under the dual pressure for the Church to conform to the powers of this world and to oppose them.’ ‘All of these have certainly expanded because of the desire for clerical power. But they have also been the fruit of the resistance to other institutions that have wished to deprive the Church of freedom.’ In short, there is no simple answer to the world-affirming or world-challenging dilemma. The Church’s way must be to engage with the world both to affirm and to challenge. We might well ask, what shaping of the Church best suits such an engagement? It would seem that a world-challenging stance will favour a centralized, pyramidal Church, with accent on the hierarchy, whereas a world-affirming Church will tend to be more devolved, with particular accent on the laity. Perhaps what is most needed today is the fostering of a strong communion life in the Church, with well-formed clergy and laity together, that, precisely as an icon of the Trinitarian God who loves the world but also calls it to conversion and growth, can be both world-affirming and world-challenging as the need arises.

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As I began to read this book in order to write this review, two coincidences occurred. Sometimes coincidence is just that; but sometimes you begin to think that it might be uncannily significant. The first was the memorial service at St Martin-in-the-Fields for Bruce Reed, whose book, *The Dynamics of Religion*, is still significant for the parochial clergy and is cited by Paul Avis. Reed’s work over the years in conferences on dependence and dependency gave new heart to many a priest and parishioner. He exposed the dynamics in and with which the Church is working and consequently ministers were better able to be aware of what was happening to them and go with, rather than against, the grain. St Martin’s was full of men and women who would understand Avis’s book.

The second coincidence occurred as I was bidding the congregation farewell at the Abbey after a weekday evensong. I saw a priest whose face I recognized but I could not remember where I had met him. We talked for a few minutes and I asked him what he was doing now. He was the incumbent of a major parish in the heart of England. So I asked him how he felt as a parish priest at the moment when the Church of England seemed increasingly to be denying the one ministry which it knows, namely the parochial ministry. He thought for a moment and said something that was to me original (and I do not hear much that is original on ministry these days). He said, ‘The parish ministry is too subtle for synods’ and I think he was right.

Avis summarizes the background against which he writes: ‘There is an alarming trend in the Church: the perverse compulsion to renounce unilaterally the pastoral opportunities provided by the Church of England’s traditional role in society’ (p. 178). This is an unusual book. The subtitle refers to a ‘Post-Christian Culture’, but the thrust of the argument is that the more traditional patterns of parochial ministry are still those which are best suited to an engagement between the Church and its various communities. It is classical Anglicanism: an insistence that theology and pastoral activities complement each other and that it is out of that engagement that new insights in theology emerge. Avis argues that the thrust of ministry and the faith must always be towards the larger, the outer world, rather than as seems to be the tendency of the moment towards a private life of faith expressed through ‘belonging without believing’ or ‘believing without belonging’.
Paul Avis is a prolific writer and is always worth reading. This is as true of this book as any other. One of his major skills is to read the work of others and then make it comprehensible and use it in weaving the fabric of his own thought. Thus just about everybody who has written on pastoral matters is here somewhere or other; as always the bibliography is extensive. He begins with four chapters on the cultural and philosophical background against which the church still exercises a pastoral ministry – or can do, if it takes its opportunities.

Two particularly helpful chapters are those on modernity and secularization and postmodernity and fragmentation: the wholesale rush to endorse postmodernity is unwise. We are largely in the modern rather than postmodern world. He sees postmodernism as more of a threat to faith than the acids of modernity, quoting Lyotard: ‘All that has been received, if only yesterday … must be suspected’. As Avis goes on to make clear, the reductionist critiques of Feuerbach, Freud and Marx against identified targets has mutated into ‘the Nietzschean hermeneutic of baseless suspicion – suspicion without a cause – that is all-consuming’ (p. 95). This passage is important, as becomes clearer in the latter half of the book. For Avis, with his queries about postmodernity, affirms that people are still for the most part living in the modern world (and we are considering pastoral work with people as they are, not the intellectual work of people as they might be or might think).

The second four chapters discuss how to apply aspects of pastoral theology. There is, however, one major omission, with which those who discount the parochial structure would always have the upper hand. This is the question of finance which currently looms so large. It is the nature of the Church of England that the more successful it is in its activities, the less income it is likely to generate for itself. What is more, money which was taken or given in order to sustain the parochial system at points where it was at its weakest is no longer available. Here are two examples of the problem of funding.

A few years ago, the Church Commissioners were in financial difficulties. The Deans and Provosts of the cathedrals voluntarily reduced grants by £400,000 (the so-called ‘grants’, of course, were historically guaranteed income which followed the purloining of cathedral assets), some of them at considerable cost to themselves. They were therefore surprised the following year to discover that the costs of bishops’ expenses had gone up precisely £400,000. Nearer the present, it was noticeable that Christmas at the Abbey (and there is some evidence from other places to confirm this) saw large congregations of people (many quite young) seeking something rather than those knowing what they were looking for. At midnight, for instance, there were over 2,000 people in the Abbey but only about 800 communicants. Many came up to receive a blessing. But that suggests that the congregations were not sophisticatedly Christian and their behaviour, while reverential, showed that they did not know their way through the liturgy. It is a reasonable surmise that any serious giving came from the 800 rather than from the other 1,200 or so.
Sometimes the Church of England is directed to consider the Church in Wales, which was disestablished in 1920. There is some research that suggests that pastorally much continues as it was and that the dynamics of communities, even if sometimes obscured, continue much as they were (Simon Taylor, ‘Disestablished Establishment: High and Earthed Establishment in the Church in Wales’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* [May 2003], pp. 227–40).

With all this excellent material, there is one other dimension which is missing, apart from the issue of money. I write this with trepidation. Paul Avis is both a scholar and a parish priest; it is clear again from this book that he loves both roles. He reflects upon theology, whether systematic or applied, in the classical literary approach. He also approaches ministry in the parish and elsewhere on the same model. In other words, as we read about ministry from time to time the nuances and stances do not quite fit. The reason is, I suspect, that he has not quite made it his own in that he has not perhaps been to enough learning conferences and relies a little too much on books and reports. For example, his mention of W. R. Bion seems to miss the difference between group therapy and group study, which is considerable. Having the level of sophistication that this book represents, author and readers alike will see the need for group training if we are to make all this our own.

This is a very worthwhile book. The title is slightly odd: neither ‘spirituality’ nor ‘post-Christian’ appearing in the index and ‘mission’ being interpreted as being through ministry – the Anglican way. And as for ‘drawing near’, I think the meaning is clear, but it is worthwhile remembering, particularly in the context of folk or common religion, that when people approach the church for one of these offices, they are not coming as visitors but are coming with the assumption that it is ‘their’ church. The book is richer than the title suggests.

Any attempt to wrestle with the realities of today’s world; the learning that we can have from history (our time is never as bad as someone else’s); the wish to pull together doctrine and practice, in a church which on the whole allows doctrine to go in favour of practice – all these are worthy aims. For, without being over dramatic, this is nothing less than a struggle for the soul of the Church of England. This is not the same as its future; we can only fight for what we know and Paul Avis has drawn up his campaign. No doubt he could do with some to join him; certainly the Church of England could do with some to work with him and his ideas.

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This monograph depends upon the view that both the Didache and the Gospel of Matthew derive from Antioch. The provenance of neither of these works is incontestable, and to that extent the reconstruction rests on hypotheses which are themselves less than secure. Despite this, the overall thesis is illuminating and plausible. It also contributes to well-known debates, with some scholars defending the Didache’s knowledge of Matthew, others denying direct relationship, and some suggesting they have a common source or even that Matthew knew the Didache. Here the Didache is taken to pre-date Matthew, but they both reflect older traditions which they have in common.

The historical reconstruction begins with issues clearly associated with Antioch in the New Testament evidence, namely the dispute between Paul and Peter described in Galatians, and relations between the Antioch and Jerusalem churches traced in Acts. A classic conundrum is thus engaged. The key to the incident Paul describes in Galatians 2.11–14 is found in the problems of table-fellowship between Christians who were Jews and Gentile converts who were not Torah-observant. To the present reviewer this has long seemed likely, and too little espoused in the scholarly literature. Here a useful discussion pinpoints Jewish anxieties about contamination by idolatry, attributing the earlier tensions between Hellenists and Hebrews in Jerusalem to a different level of strictness about contacts with Gentiles. In Jerusalem these converts were all Jews. It was only in Antioch that Gentiles with no previous attachment to Judaism were converted to the Christian way. So here in Antioch the problems of unity at the Lord’s table were the more acute.

The so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is correlated with the meeting in Jerusalem described in Galatians 2.1–10. As Paul claims, the success of the mission to Gentiles was acknowledged by the Jerusalem leadership. But the incident that is next related by Paul suggests that subsequently those leaders came under pressure and changed their minds. Slee’s novel proposal is that the letter containing the ‘decree’ which is reported in Acts 15.23–29 originated in the church at Antioch. So far from it being an agreed compromise reached in Jerusalem, it becomes the fruit of the struggles in Antioch provoked by the messengers from James. The letter was sent from Antioch to announce the compromise position they had reached in order to preserve the united table-fellowship of their community.

The next section concentrates on the Didache, beginning with the question of its provenance and date, and showing how it reflects this background. Produced pre-70 in Antioch, it provides instructions designed to enable Gentiles to enter...
the eucharistic meal. Only those who have agreed to observe the prohibition on idol food are to be admitted to baptism, and only those baptized are to share in the eucharist. The compiler is anxious, as was Paul, to maintain unity, and this is supported by stern warnings about prophets from outside the community and their strict regulation. The church needs to honour its local overseers, the Gentile householders who act as patrons to the community.

The final section engages with the Gospel of Matthew, exploring its provenance and date, and then the place of Gentiles and authority figures in this Gospel. The conclusion is reached that, despite its links with the Didache, the picture is very different. There are similar traditions but Matthew’s version is later (80–100 CE), and Matthew comes from a different group within the Antiochene church. Matthew’s group is heir to the Jewish Christians who opposed the Didachist and Paul. Matthew’s church seems to be fully Torah-observant, expecting Gentiles to enter it as Jews by full conversion. However, ‘under the impact of the Jewish War the group is now in transition and in the process of turning to the Gentile world, while simultaneously refusing to leave the Jewish one behind’ (p. 155).

The subject of this thesis, then, is the issue of Gentile entry to the church in Antioch, and the related problem of Jewish-Gentile table-fellowship. It is an interesting reconstruction. Its plausibility is further advanced by a nod towards evidence from Ignatius and Theophilus indicating that Jewish traits remained attractive in Antioch. To these developments in Antioch, it is suggested, we owe the development of the episcopacy, and its eventual triumph over ‘charismatic Torah-observant prophets’. But above all it is to the church in Antioch that the fateful decision to admit Gentiles is to be attributed – a decision with far-reaching consequences for the future of Christianity and its relationship with Judaism.

As ever, an historical reconstruction of this kind demands reading between the lines, and Michelle Slee’s creativity is likely to provoke considerable criticism. However, whether one accepts her every move or not, the effect of reading this book is to stimulate new perspectives and insights, and that surely is what scholarship is all about.

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In recent years it has been commonplace to employ the language of the seasons in order to describe the development of ecumenism. Thus the 1960s and 1970s have been described as having been an ecumenical springtime, whereas more recently we have been said to have entered an ecumenical winter. This seasonal language has its advantages as a striking way of describing the overall state of ecumenical relationships at a particular point in time. However, it can also be argued that the language of seasons presents a too static and too unified picture of ecumenism. The reality of ecumenical relationships is more complicated than the seasonal description and (to vary the meteorological analogy) is more like typical British weather, variegated and subject to frequent change.

The complexity of the ecumenical scene is well illustrated by a few examples of recent developments. On the positive side the last few years have seen an agreed statement on Christology produced by the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox dialogue, the development of the work of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity and Mission and the signing of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. On the negative side, the issue of homosexual relationships has opened up new divisions within the Anglican Communion and has created strains in its relationships with a number of its ecumenical partners; and the Southern Baptist Convention has recently announced its intention of withdrawing from the Baptist World Alliance.

In the face of this sort of complexity, two issues arise. The first is how we assess the overall shape of ecumenical relationships if simple descriptions such as springtime and winter will not suit the case, and the second is how ecumenism should develop in the future given the ecumenical tensions and problems that currently exist. It is these two issues that are addressed in *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek*, a book which had its origins at a conference held at Westcott House, Cambridge in 1999 to mark the launch of the Centre for Ecumenical Studies. The book consists of a series of papers by different authors and, as its title suggests, these papers are concerned with the two issues of the current state of ecumenism and how it might develop in the future. Within these broad parameters the papers cover a broad range of topics from a broad range of perspectives. Thus Urs Von Arx, David Carter and Peter McEnhill look at the ecumenical task from an Old Catholic, Methodist and Reformed perspective respectively; Keith Clements and Valentin Dedji explore the development of and prospects for ecumenism in Europe and Africa; and the Lutheran Michael Root and the Anglican Mary Tanner disagree politely about whether reconciled diversity is an appropriate goal for the ecumenical journey.
Because the papers have this breadth of coverage, are thorough, up to date and well-documented, and are written by people with a long experience of the ecumenical movement, *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek* can be strongly recommended both to those already involved in the ecumenical scene who want to be kept up to date with current ecumenical discussion and to those who are not yet involved but who want to understand what the ecumenical movement is about.

This having been said, there are a number of weaknesses in this collection of essays that anyone considering a similar project in the future might want to consider. The first weakness is that in spite of the broad range of perspectives in the book there is still a certain narrowness in its outlook. This is because the writers represent the mainstream churches that are already fully involved in the ecumenical scene. What would have been valuable would have been voices that are not frequently heard in the ecumenical conversation. For example, there are no contributors from either the Evangelical or the Pentecostal traditions, and yet these are traditions which have their own distinctive approaches to ecumenical issues and are a growing force in world Christianity.

The second weakness is that this is a collection of essays by those who are ecumenical enthusiasts. This in itself is not problematic apart from the fact that there is a recurrent danger that those who are enthusiastic about ecumenism often tend to discuss ecumenism with those who are of a like mind, whereas arguably it is more important that they speak to those who are sceptical about the value of the ecumenical enterprise or about the way it is currently conducted. What would be useful would be a volume that promoted dialogue between those with different views of the value of the ecumenical enterprise so that they talk to each other rather than to those who think as they do.

The third weakness is that all the contributors in this volume still seem to see the future of the Christian Church in terms of the sort of traditional mainstream Christianity that is currently found in the historic Christian denominations. However, all over the world the traditional denominations are finding it more and more difficult to maintain their traditional forms of polity in the face of the changes that are taking place both in the churches themselves and in the wider world, and all over the world ‘new ways of being Church’ are emerging. If ecumenism is going to continue to be relevant in the coming century, ecumenists will have to discover how to respond positively to these new developments and a book like the present one that is concerned with ‘ecumenical prospects for the third millennium’ needs to address this issue. To put it another way, the central question for ecumenism, as it is for ecclesiology in general, is the relationship between what J. H. Newman called the mystical and institutional aspects of Christianity. How should the Church organize itself as a human institution in a way that appropriately reflects its spiritual identity as the earthly form of the
body of Christ? The new circumstances of our age are causing this question to be addressed afresh and ecumenists need to ensure that they contribute constructively to the discussion even if this means being willing to think radically outside the traditional ecclesiastical box.

If such radical thinking is going to be fruitful, however, it needs to have a proper theological grounding and this brings me to the fourth and final weakness of this book. This weakness is a failure to address the two really big theological questions that those in ecumenism will need to be able to answer if the ecumenical movement is to have a viable future.

The first question is why the search for visible unity is theologically important. The contributors to the present volume all assume that it is, but only Christopher Hill addresses the issue of why it is and he only does so briefly. What is needed is a more extensive discussion and one that shows how the basic Christian belief about the saving action of God in Christ necessarily points towards the importance of visible unity. As St Paul argues in Ephesians 1.1–4.16, the unity of Christians with one another and their growth together in faith and mutual love is the outworking of the electing love of God made effective through the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. A state of affairs in which such unity and growth is not present is thus a theological monstrosity and it is this basic fact that needs to be got across in a clear and persuasive fashion.

The second question is what visible unity and growth together in faith and love involve. Traditionally the ecumenical movement has addressed this question in terms of asking how the received theological and ecclesiological positions of the various churches can be related to each other in such a way as to allow the various churches as churches to move closer together. However, as the late Jean Marie-Tillard points out in his paper in this volume, the new divisions that are opening up in world Christianity, and which recent events in the Anglican Communion highlight, cut across many of the traditional denominational divisions and are concerned with fundamental issues about the locus of theological authority, the nature of Christian belief and the appropriate forms of Christian ethics, particularly in Western society.

The search for unity in the future will have to mean a search for ways of dealing adequately with these issues in a way that allows unity and truth to be upheld together.

As Tillard says, what this means is that: ‘... for the sake of Christian unity, churches need to find together ways to strengthen together, consolidate together, confirm together, clarify together, secure together the common faith of the Church of God, through an authentic search for truth, using the most reliable conclusions of exegetical, theological and historical scholarship.’ Unfortunately, Tillard did not spell out in detail what this would mean, and now never will, and none of the other essayists looks at the issue. However, for the reasons just noted, what Tillard
is saying is vitally important. What is required is for other people to explore and develop this agenda. Any volunteers?

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The book title will invite many to invest in this collection of reflections on one of the most controversial issues in current Christianity: how does the Church, divided as it is, discern where the Spirit is leading it, and how does it prevent further division in the midst of change? The essays in this volume come from two symposia held at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of the Christian Church, whose Director, Paul Avis, is also the editor of the volume. They considered the presenting issue of the Episcopal Ministry Act of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1993, which made provision for extended episcopal oversight for those who could not accept the ordination of women to the priesthood. All the contributors support, to various degrees, this Act. With one exception, they are all in positions of leadership in the Church of England.

This context inevitably limits the scope of the very broad topic which is the title of the volume. ‘Seeking the truth of change in the church’ means primarily ‘the Church of England living with itself and others in the aftermath of its own decisions’. Moreover, since there is no one who opposes the Act, or who gives a full-blown defence of the ordination of women (although several of the authors make it clear that they are in favour of it), all the many voices needed as the Church seeks the truth of change are not here. Nevertheless, the contributors take care to universalize much of the thought that has gone into this one church’s situation. All of the authors are ecumenists, and so they bring to the consideration of an internal matter their experience of dialogue in the wider Christian scene, and their study of the Church’s history.

Writing as someone not of the Church of England, I would have found it helpful if the book had begun with the facts of the presenting issue, as Mary Tanner does admirably and thoroughly in the fourth chapter by recounting the story of the ordination of women to the priesthood in England and the subsequent Act of Synod. Instead, the book begins with the perspective of the one non-Anglican, William
Rusch, who briefly and deftly updates his critical work on reception (W. G. Rusch, *Reception: An Ecumenical Opportunity* [Philadelphia: Fortress/Lutheran World Federation], 1988). Rusch's essay, 'The Landscape of Reception', deserves attention in ecumenical circles as providing a quick history of the evolution of the concept of reception. Rusch draws the conclusion that 'ecumenical reception has been, and will be in the future, possible only on the basis of an effective concept of differentiated consensus', and he raises the question as to whether this insight, which arose from bilateral ecumenical dialogues, can be applied to internal realities of churches. It would seem that most of the rest of the book is an affirmation that in fact the best-case scenario when potentially church-dividing issues arise, while begging the question as to what degree of consensus actually exists in the Church of England.

The editor, Paul Avis, has two contributions in addition to the preface. In ‘Reception: Towards an Anglican Understanding’, he posits an Anglican approach to reception that is 'marked by gradualness, mutuality, active discernment, responsibility, unpredictability and the real possibility of non-reception' – as contrasted with what he portrays somewhat polemically as a hierarchical, top-down process with Roman Catholicism. He helpfully points out that reception is ‘related both to the demands of apostolic continuity and to the inculturation of the faith’, a theme expanded upon by Bishop John Hind in his article ‘Reception and Communion’.

Hind’s work is an affirmation that a divided church needs checks and balances in the discernment process about the legitimacy of the development of doctrine. ‘These checks and balances include the need to distinguish between, on the one hand, the faith which is necessary for salvation, and on the other, either the formulae through which this faith is expressed or matters which may safely be left to local or individual judgement.’ This is the heart of the matter, indeed. Hind argues that such discernment requires communion and a commitment to a shared life, even when, or perhaps more especially when, there is disagreement.

Robert Hannaford’s article with the far-reaching title ‘Communion and the Kingdom of God’ in fact makes a good sweep through the topics of communion ecclesiology, koinonia, sacramentality, and the church as penultimate community living in both promise and fulfilment, while debunking two sets of polarities: visible/invisible church myth and the ontological/mission understanding of communion. The section on koinonia makes a good introduction to the recent treatment of the theme. His conclusion, that the Act of Synod ‘is in a small way an action in the service of the ultimate state of humanity’, may be a little grander than is warranted, but his point is clear: the struggle to maintain unity in the midst of disagreement is a noble one, and not a mere political compromise.

Bishops Christopher Hill and Paul Richardson both begin with the development of the doctrine and process of reception, though in treating the modern expressions of it Hill draws more on Anglican sources (the various Eames Commissions and
follow-up, The Grindrod Report), while Richardson tends to cite contemporary Roman Catholics. Hill concludes that the Act of Synod is an exercise in pastoral economy, in the Orthodox sense of that word, while Richardson helpfully points out the broader, global context of church decision-making:

The gospel discloses unsuspected aspects of [the scriptures’] truth, unexplored depths of meaning, as it comes into contact with different world-views and is brought into dialogue with new cultures and philosophies. Fresh insights generated by this process then need to be received by the Church as a whole to prevent one part of the Church being trapped by its own perspective or being blinded by its own culture. (p. 131)

In a personal essay that verges on lament but ends in hope, Geoffrey Rowell discusses ‘Learning to Live with Difference’. As a clear critic of the ordination of women, for both theological and ecumenical reasons, Bishop Rowell makes a plea for the Church of England to model for others how people who differ in conviction can live together in mutual respect and harmony.

Avis’s second piece is more directed to the realities of the Church of England as it attempts to live out its affirmation of both the ordination of women and the place of those who dissent from it. It raises spectres, which suggest that the agreement reached in the Act of Synod may not, in fact, be holding – that those who dissent want more distance from the majority, and that those in the majority are losing patience with the accommodation. Nevertheless, Avis affirms that the ecclesiological oddity that is the result of the Act of Synod is a ‘bearable anomaly’, a ‘temporary pastoral accommodation’, while urging that its damage to the church be limited and repaired.

The consistent note in this series of essays is that sense of the church being called, in times of deep division, to be the best that it can be: to make room, not grudgingly, but warmly and enthusiastically and humbly, for those who disagree. If one is treating a new thing, it is imperative to make the case for it in an open-ended fashion, to show its connectedness with the tradition of the church, its legitimacy as a development of the faith once delivered to the saints. If one is questioning a new thing, it is imperative to listen to the case with an open mind, to argue with faithfulness but not with anger, to keep the debate theological and not personal. As John Hind puts it, the actions of the Church of England were intended ‘to hold together in as high a degree of communion as possible a diversity of views and practice while we ourselves and the wider Church test the nature of the decision we have taken’. One hopes that the same principles can be applied as new potential divisive issues arise, as of course they have.

There are a few quibbles I have with this collection. As is perhaps inevitable with papers from conferences, there is a good deal of repetition and overlap, particularly in the history of the development of reception. A number of authors
quote the same sources. One wishes that Bishop Richardson’s observation about the insights from other cultures had been brought into play – there is no Anglican voice from outside England, and only one from another denomination (though Roman Catholics and Orthodox are frequently brought to the table throughout the presentations). It is odd that in a work about the ordination of women, the only woman called on to contribute is a layperson. Occasionally, authors lapse into speaking of ‘the Church’ as if the Church of England is the whole of the Anglican Communion, or even the Church Universal. However, these nits being picked by an ordained woman from another Province of the Anglican Communion should not detract from the usefulness and timeliness of this book. It is recommended for anyone contemplating contemporary Anglicanism and for ecumenists, for whom the discussion of a particular church dealing with a particular issue at a particular moment in time is also a lively contribution to the deepening of our understanding of how as Church we respond to the faithful God who leads us into all truth.

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