

The Church as Sanctified Community of the Triune God

What is the church? What does it mean to identify a particular community as church? Is “church” merely a moniker for any religious community? Or does “church” have a distinctly Christian meaning? And can the word “church” in its distinctly Christian sense bear theological weight? In this paper I aim to tease out the theological meaning of “church.” If successful, these elucidations may serve as a framework for discussing the concrete ecclesiological issues of our day.

Unfortunately, the road to a properly theological understanding of the church is paved with difficulties. I do not refer merely to the disappointment, boredom, and suspicion concerning the church, both from within and from without. No, the greatest obstacles to theologizing about the church are themselves theological. How do we connect our talk of God with our talk of the church? Systematic theology is the activity whereby Christians make connections between our various beliefs in order to better perceive and present the fullness of the gospel. We are not looking for just any connections, however; we are looking for connections to our beliefs about God. “What’s God got to do with it?” is the theologian’s refrain. Only statements that attempt to answer the question of God are properly *theo*-logical.

So, why is it so difficult to connect our church-talk to our God-talk? Three particular obstacles come to mind. The first is the problem of *theological presumption*: we habitually take for granted our most basic beliefs. What we believe about God—who he is and what he does—is assumed to have been settled long ago. But is this really so? Can we really count on all of us to think spontaneously thoughts worthy of our God? A staff pastor I know once asked her senior pastor after an interview with a potential minister of congregational care, “Where is she at theologically?” The senior pastor responded, “I don’t know. Why would I ask theological questions of someone who will be visiting sick people?” Such presumption leads to neglect, confusion and ignorance. We ought not to take our most cherished beliefs for granted; rather, we should ask pointed questions about the identity and activity of the Christian God. Only then will be able to ground our ecclesiology in our theology.

The second problem is that of *soteriological abstraction*: we consistently separate our talk of salvation from our talk of God. This problem is a consequence of the first: we presume that we all agree about God, so let’s move on to the interesting, debatable stuff about conversion, predestination, sanctification, end times, etc. I recently taught a FLAME class in advanced theology. The focus was the doctrine of the trinity. One of the students objected, saying “This doesn’t sound like theology; theology is about the order of salvation: prevenient grace, justification, initial sanctification, etc.” In due time, she and (some of) the other students came to appreciate inquiry into the doctrine of God which lies behind our doctrine of grace. But her initial objection unmasked the soteriological abstraction of so much Wesleyan theology. For Wesleyan theology to be theology, we must begin again at the beginning and talk not only about sanctification, but about the Sanctifier. Only then will be able to inquire into a “Wesleyan view of the church.”¹

¹ We cannot ascertain a Wesleyan ecclesiology by simply reconstructing Wesley’s or any other historical figure’s view of the church, though such descriptive projects are indispensable for the normative task of Wesleyan theology. Historical theology seeks to identify the spirit of one’s tradition so that the same spirit might animate the doing of theology in our time.

The third and final problem is that of *ecclesiological reduction*: our talk of the church has been reduced to sociological pragmatism. Now don't hear me wrong: the church *is* an empirical reality and thus has benefited greatly from statistical research and demographic analysis. These tools have helped us stop groping in the dark for practical solutions. Anyone who rejects sociology wholesale denies the humanity of the church. But the church is more than a social system! It cannot be adequately explained or guided by empirical research alone. To reduce the church to observable phenomena is to deny the divine agency that creates, sustains and consummates her. As I've heard Harry Wood at a recent Penn-Jersey District event say, "Theology should be in the driver's seat; sociology should be in the back seat." We don't need to kick sociology out of the car; we just need to prevent it from becoming a back seat driver. And the best way to do prevent sociological reductionism is to locate our talk of the church within our talk of God.

Now that I've painted myself into a corner, let me indicate how I plan to overcome the obstacles of theological presumption, soteriological abstraction, and ecclesiological reduction. In the remainder of this paper, I will perform trinitarian renditions of three prominent descriptions of the church: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.² Each of these descriptions will be developed from the perspective of the triune God who sanctifies the church. The intended result is to join together the theological connections that have been torn asunder by our presumption, abstraction and reduction. I am not delusional enough to think that I can single-handedly surmount these obstacles by simply talking my way through these connections. However, inasmuch as these problems are perpetuated by bad habits of speech, the least a theologian can do is display what a good habit of speech looks like.

What follows is thus an exercise in grammatical analysis: identifying the subject, verb and object of each of the three ecclesial descriptions under investigation. The triune God is the subject of these sentences. Sanctification in its many aspects is the verb. The church is the object of God's sanctifying action. Unfolded in trinitarian terms: the Father sets apart a people for the Son by the Spirit; the Son cleanses his body for the Father by the Spirit; the Spirit fills the temple for the Father and the Son. These are three distinct yet unified ways of saying "God sanctifies the church." All this talk of grammar might make one wonder whether I am just "making this up." I assure you that I am genuinely trying to perceive and present the inner logic of our beliefs. But, in case what follows is not self-authenticating, I will add to its appeal by indicating how this language can help reframe a concrete ecclesiological issue: membership commitments. Such practical benefits cannot alone make theological statements true. But the usefulness of theological language in the service of the church's mission is certainly a point in its favor.

I. The Father sets apart a people for the Son by the Spirit

In God's history with us, God has revealed that he is in eternity God for us. God in eternity self-differentiates his being as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son. The Son is not another God, but another *in* God. Even as God is centered on himself, God is also others-centered. These eternal persons in relationship are kept both united and distinct by the power of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son as their bond of love. These eternal relations are the basis for God's self-differentiated action in time. God purposes from all

² The selection of these biblically based and ecumenical received descriptions of the church should be uncontroversial. A rich systematic deployment of these same three descriptions can be found in Robert W. Jenson, "Toward a Christian Doctrine of Israel," *CTI Reflections* 3 (Autumn 2000) pp. 2-21 as well as in his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 189-227

eternity to enter into time to bring glory to himself and to share his glory with his creation. God sends himself. The Father sends the Son to become incarnate by the power of the Spirit. The Father and the Son send the Spirit as the outpouring of God's power onto his creatures.

However, God does not simply "show up." God sets in motion a history that will be fulfilled by his coming. This history centers on a particular people. God establishes a covenant with a particular people among whom he will dwell. In so choosing a people, God is sanctifying a people: setting them apart for divine service. Not just any service, but service for God's Son.³ The Father in his mercy chooses this people from among all others so that his Son may be born among them.⁴ Toward this end, God keeps his people by the power of his Spirit. The Spirit leads them through the wilderness. The Spirit is present to them in temple, land, and book as they wait for the coming of the Son. The Spirit empowers prophets to orient the people toward their future. In short, the Father sets apart a people for the Son by the Spirit.⁵

Who is this people? Whom does the Father set apart for the sake of his Son by the power of his Spirit? Well, it should be clear that we are talking about Israel. It is Israel whom God chooses. It is Israel in whom Jesus Christ is born. It is Israel whom God keeps by his Spirit. Israel is the people of God. If we want to understand what it means to be set apart by God for God, we must look to Israel, the people of God. Although this fits well within a broader view of the triune God's sanctifying work, such a turn to Israel raises an ecclesiological problem: is the church also the people of God? By what right do we call this community of Jews and Gentiles who bear direct witness to Jesus Christ the people of God?⁶ Can the language of people be adapted or extended to include the church?⁷

Needless to say, the relationship between Israel and the church raises complex questions that deserve complex answers. Some have called this *the* ecumenical problem — making intra-Christian divisions appear petty by comparison. I do not seek to answer it completely or conclusively here, but I would like to identify a potential Wesleyan contribution to this question.

Some of the greatest strides in re-conceiving the relationship between Israel and the church in more positive terms have been made by recent trends in Pauline scholarship. According to the "The New Perspective on Paul," it is becoming increasingly clear that Paul had a much more positive attitude toward the Jewish law than some traditional interpretations have allowed. Judaism at the time of Jesus and Paul can be characterized by its covenantal nomism: by

³ I have learned a great deal about the missional interpretation of the doctrine of election from Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) pp. 32-43, 75-87. The significance of the doctrine of election in Newbigin's theology has been analyzed by George Hunsberger in *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998). It is imperative that Wesleyans do not ignore the doctrine of election, but rather seek to articulate our distinctive approach to this biblical doctrine. William J. Abraham offers a surprising sketch of John Wesley's view of predestination in *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) pp. 167-180.

⁴ Gal 4:4.

⁵ Although the works of the triune God are indivisible, they are distinguishable. On the basis of scriptural patterns of speech we may appropriately attribute different aspects of this one work to different persons in God.

⁶ It is not enough to point to Paul's passing reference to the church as the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), for we must ask in what sense or senses such an appellation may be taken.

⁷ *Lumen Genitum*, the Vatican II dogmatic constitution on the church, makes ample use of the language of "people of God" to describe the church as a move beyond institutionalism and clericalism. On the one hand, this habit of speech coincided with a reappraisal of the church's relationship to the Jewish people. On the other hand, this habit perpetuated the church's cooptation of Israel's identity.

following the law, a Jew does not “get in,” but “stays in.”⁸ Even the law is a gift of grace. Paul’s theology was not so much a result of a search for grace after having being pressed under the weight of the law.⁹ Rather, Paul’s attitude to the law is shaped by the apocalyptic coming of God announced in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which relativizes the law but does not abolish it. So the fulfillment of the law in Christ brings with it the triumph of God’s covenant with Israel.¹⁰

The point of bringing all this up is simply to observe that Wesleyans are considerably less threatened by these developments than some of our fellow inheritors of the protestant reformation.¹¹ We Wesleyans instinctually grasp that Paul has a complex attitude toward the law.¹² We can stomach the notion of greater continuity between Israel and the church. A Pauline ecclesiology of Gentile inclusion in God’s covenantal community characterized by law-keeping fits well with the distinctive spirit of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition.¹³ I do not think that this parity alone justifies the claims of either Wesleyan theology or the New Perspective. I only wish to indicate that Wesleyans should feel comfortable assimilating the insights of recent Paul scholarship inasmuch as they are helpful for developing a theology of continuity between Israel and the church.

So what ecclesiological lesson can the church learn from Israel? The triune God bears witness to himself through particularity. In other words, Israel fulfills its task simply by *being different*. This is also true of the church. God sets apart us so that the world will take notice of him. A holy church is a different church, a people that stands out among the many peoples of the world. We must, of course, beware of setting up arbitrary and inhospitable differences between the church and the world. But the church is not the world! Anyone who seeks to erase all difference between church and world is endangering the mission of the church to the world.

The implications for membership commitments should be evident: *concrete identity markers* are an aspect of God’s sanctification of the church. We need not apologize for our oddities. Actually, apologizing for them spoils them. We should celebrate our difference, although with an inviting rather than repelling attitude. Only if we are identifiable as a Christian community will the world see our works and praise our Father in heaven.¹⁴ You may recall a tragedy that took place in

⁸ The covenantal nomism of Second Temple Judaism and its implications for New Testament interpretation are explored in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1977), *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1985) and *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1987).

⁹ The now-classic critique of the received wisdom that Paul was terrorized by works of the law prior to his conversion is Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (July 1963) pp. 199-215. Reprinted in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) pp. 78-96.

¹⁰ Romans 9-11 is the key text from which to understand Paul’s complex thought on these matters. Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994).

¹¹ I use the circumspect language of “less threatened” because I have a hunch that the Wesleyan tradition is more committed to the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone than some contemporary Wesleyan theology would have us believe.

¹² Respect for law is very near the heart of the Wesleyan tradition, as argued by Chang Hoon Park, *The Theology of John Wesley as “Checks to Antinomianism,”* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, 2002) and Kenneth J. Collins, “John Wesley’s Platonic Conception of the Moral Law,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 116-128.

¹³ The role of Jewish law in the historical development of Christian ethics has been traced by Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginnings of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000).

¹⁴ Matt 5:16.

Pennsylvania a few months ago. A man killed three Amish school children in a fit of rage. You may also remember the amazing acts of reconciliation that followed. The News coverage did not treat these acts as a mere human interest story, but saw them as great acts of faith. Why? Because even the News could see the concrete identity markers that set apart the Amish as a community of faith. They bore witness *to* the world by their difference *from* the world. And thus they lived according to the truth that the Father sets apart of a people for the Son by the Spirit. In our own way, may it also be so with us.

II. The Son cleanses his body for the Father by the Spirit

Having set apart a people for himself, God becomes incarnate and dwells among us. God becomes human. As in the establishing of the covenant, so also in the fulfilling of the covenant God's action is self-differentiated. In fact, it is here that God's triune identity is definitively revealed, for the Son, in distinction from the Father and the Spirit, becomes incarnate. The Son alone becomes incarnate. Yet the triune God is indivisibly involved in the incarnation. As the Father generates the Son in eternity, so the Father sends the Son in time. And as the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son in eternity, so the Spirit binds the Son to the Father as he sojourns in time.

God sanctifies human flesh for the sake of his mission. God brings Jesus of Nazareth into strict identity with himself. The Son of God *is* Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Son of God. In the context of this personal identity, the human flesh is utterly obedient to God. As such, the incarnate Son obeys the Father by the Spirit. The Spirit drives; the flesh obeys. The obedience of Jesus Christ runs from his conception through his whole active life and culminates in his passion and death. His entire life of obedience is affirmed when on the third day the Father raised the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. By this history of obedience, sinful humanity is cleansed. In short, the Son cleanses his body for the Father by the Spirit.

It is by this history of obedience that our redemption is won. God has fulfilled the covenant by this history of obedience. God can look upon his creature and call it good, for Christ can look at his cleansed body and celebrate its obedience. But what about us? What does this have to do with the church? Certainly Christ's body is cleansed, but are we not still dirtied by disobedience? Here is where the biblical language of body is so helpful. For although first and foremost the body of Christ refers to the human flesh named Jesus of Nazareth, in a secondary and dependent yet very real sense, the body of Christ refers to the church. We are united to him as body to head. This is not the hypostatic union of the incarnation, whereby God is identified as Jesus; but it is a union nonetheless. And so the Son's cleansing of his body includes his cleansing of us! Now this cleansing might sound like some automatic mystical process, but that is not how body language operates in the New Testament. No, body language appears in the context of exhortation: because we are the body of Christ, we ought to do this or that. The cleansing of the body of Christ takes place as the church by the power of the Holy Spirit obeys the will of the Father revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus we are not only witnesses; we are *obedient* witnesses to the triune God.

What does this mean for the life of the church? An affirmation of Christ's cleansing of his body inclines one toward a specific way of thinking about the marks of the church. During the ecclesiological revolution that came to be known as the reformation, the various protestant groups were compelled to defend themselves against the charge of schism. The general response was to develop a doctrine of the marks of the church whereby one can identify the true church

from the false church. The list of marks varied from group to group. Martin Bucer, the leader of the reformation in the city of Strausbourg, recommended three marks of the church: wherever the pure word of God is preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is properly executed. Because of the perceived abuses of the radical reformers in their emphasis and application of church discipline, the magisterial reformers dropped discipline as a mark of the church in favor of the twofold pattern of word and sacrament.¹⁵ The debate concerning two or three marks reemerged a century later during the Puritan controversy in England. The Puritans pushed for the return of discipline as the third mark of the church, and on its basis began to question the authority of the Anglican Church. Through the influence of his Puritan heritage, John Wesley affirmed the third mark and the churches that developed out of the Methodist revival include the third mark in their constitutional documents, many of which are not inconsequentially named “The Discipline.”¹⁶

The point of this historical excursus is that the process of concrete discipleship is a critical aspect of what it means to be the church. To be the body of Christ is to be obedient to the triune God. Church discipline is not just institutional maintenance. More importantly, it is the process whereby the body of Christ is brought into submission to God. Church discipline is a spiritual exercise. The implication for membership commitments is that whatever “list” we come up with cannot simply be a matter of who’s in and who’s out. All too often membership commitments are too narrowly associated with the act of *becoming* a member. But these guidelines are not only boundaries, but also goals. We ought to seek after a life of obedience as a community. “Because you said you would” is an unsustainable basis for fulfilling membership commitments. Because they are an expression of our obedience to God is a much better reason. This raises the question of whether our commitments are really pleasing to God. But responsibly and constitutionally developing our commitments is itself part of our communal pursuit of obedience. Even as they undergo development, the process of accountability to our membership commitments is a direct expression of the Son’s cleansing of his body for the Father by the Spirit.

III. The Spirit fills the temple for the Father and the Son

Having enacted a life of obedience as the fulfillment of his covenant with Israel, the triune God reigns in glory as he ushers in his kingdom. The Spirit of God blows toward this final unity of all things. The same Spirit who unites Father and Son in eternal love and empowers the incarnate Son to obey the Father has now been poured out on God’s community of obedient witnesses. He has been given as a promissory down payment of things to come. It is by the Spirit that God raised Jesus from the dead as the first fruits of the resurrection of all flesh. The Spirit is thus fundamentally oriented toward the future. It is only at the end of history when the Spirit will complete his work of binding, recapitulating the eternal bond of love between the Father and the Son in the marriage of Christ and his church that places God and humanity in perfect harmony.

The Spirit of God is drawing all of humanity toward this end. He does this by *filling* specific human agents with his power that they might live in accordance with their future destiny.

¹⁵ For instance, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Translated by F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) Book IV, ch. I, sect. 9, p. 1023.

¹⁶ The Constitution of North American General Conference of the Wesleyan Church explicitly endorses the three marks of the church, cf. *The Discipline of the Wesleyan Church 2004* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing, 2005) #240, p. 21. More on Wesley’s puritan heritage can be found in Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) pp. 11-28 and Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

Although the church cannot be equated with the kingdom, it is the beachhead of the kingdom by the power of the Spirit dwelling within her. The church is thus rightly called the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit fills this temple for the Father and the Son.¹⁷

Having empowered the incarnate Son to obey the Father, the Spirit now empowers the church to obey the will of God. We are not given an impossible standard and then left to our own devices. The law of love enacted in Jesus Christ is written on our hearts by his Holy Spirit. We are empowered by the Spirit to live lives pleasing to God. As such we are an example of the future God desires for all people. We are not only obedient witnesses, but also *exemplary* obedient witnesses. If the world wants to know what the future holds, it should be able to look no further than the church.

What does this entail for our understanding of the church? It should at minimum give us pause before rejecting the language of “end times community.” The holiness movement from its inception has had a utopian impulse that must be acknowledged. Some early Wesleyan Methodists thought they were bringing in the kingdom with their social reforms. Some holiness camp meetings were perceived as a special outpouring of the Spirit in preparation for the return of Christ. Some holiness churches understood themselves as sojourners and pilgrims in a strange land. The very logic of a holiness movement presupposes a view of the church as a foretaste of heaven in some sense. It is this sort of eschatological consciousness that propelled holiness churches toward the future in their opposition not only to slavery, but also to the subordination of women and the sex trade. In these things the holiness movement was ahead of its time. While some Christians sat idly by, tolerating sin as a necessity in a fallen world, holiness movements pushed the church forward toward the future. This need not be an act of hubris, provided the church really *is* the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now this utopian impulse is not without its problems. No one community can be identified with the fullness of the kingdom. God will finish his work by a sovereign upheaval beyond the forces immanent in this natural world. This radical limit must be set against any society, culture, or church that claims to be working toward the coming kingdom. But within these limits, an awareness of the Spirit’s filling should continue to propel us toward God’s future. We should ask what new thing God is doing and seek to participate in it. We should be ahead of the times. We should seek to become the community for which the world is groaning. In other words, we should be living in the end times.

An implication of this way of thinking is that membership commitments should reflect not only where we have been but also where we are going. Membership commitments should describe the kind of community that God wants the world to be. Membership commitments should thus describe the kind of community the world *needs* to be. The church ought to be attractive to the world, as an example of the world’s future. This does not mean merely revising our membership commitments in order to avoid offending the world. We can and should be different from the

¹⁷ The asymmetry between this phrase and the previous two is not an accident. Persons in God share one divine being, and thus can be distinguished only by their relations of origin. If the Son originates from the Father, the Spirit must originate from the Father and the Son (*filioque*) in order to be a distinct person. This formal relation corresponds to the Spirit’s role as the bond of love. As these eternal relations are recapitulated in the history of the covenant, the Spirit is the bonding agent of all God’s works. Thus the preposition “by” is appropriate for the Spirit, even when we speak of him as the subject of these works. As the Father and the Son work by the Spirit, so the Spirit also works *by* the Spirit. All that the Spirit does is done *for* the Father and the Son, as he glorifies them by uniting them to each other and uniting us to Christ.

world, but not arbitrarily so. We should be different from the world in the way the world desires to be different from itself. Everybody wants to make the world a better place. The church happens to know what that looks like, for it sees the future of the world in the face of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This Spirit-filled orientation toward the future means we should ask tough questions about what the future holds. What attitudes will characterize the new heavens and the new earth? What kind of society will take shape at the marriage feast of the Lamb? What are the politics of the New Jerusalem? How can our ecclesial standards reflect this future reality? What must be added? What must be adapted? What must be removed? These sorts of questions will guide us in the development of membership commitments that exemplify the Spirit's filling of the temple for the Father and the Son.¹⁸

Conclusion

The church is the sanctified community of the triune God. The Father sets apart a people for the Son by the Spirit. The Son cleanses his body for the Father by the Spirit. The Spirit fills the temple for the Father and the Son. Thus we can say with boldness that the church *is* the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. As such we are exemplary, obedient witnesses to the triune God. This pattern of thought does not solve every concrete ecclesial problem, but it does offer a language with which to discuss pressing issues of the day. My hope is that equipped with such good habits of speech we can stop talking past each other and start working together to live as the sanctified community of the triune God.

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¹⁸ It is not without reason that I have avoided specific recommendations for membership standards. Such specifics would distract from the primary contribution of theology to church practice: presenting the inner logic of Christian belief as the condition for proper thought and action. The theologian plays an auxiliary role by providing a context in which church leaders can discuss concrete concerns.