



The Church: Who and Whose Are We?

Martin Luther, in his Smalcald Articles of 1537, says that even “a child seven years old knows what the Church is,” for they pray “I believe in a holy Christian Church.” Twentieth-century theology, however, has been much less confident: there has been a torrent of literature struggling with the question “What is the church?” Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan sees ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, as *the* theological focus of the twentieth century. He writes, “the doctrine of the church became, as it had never quite been before, the bearer of the whole Christian message for the twentieth century.” Fuller Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen similarly speaks of an “ecclesiological renaissance” in contemporary theology.

Perhaps John Stackhouse best helps us to see why ecclesiology is so important: “When we, the church, are confused about who we are and whose we are, we can become anything and anyone’s.” Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity—who we are. It is about understanding to whom we belong and why—whose we are. And if we are not explicit in developing our self-understanding in terms of our role and place in the biblical drama, we are likely going to be shaped by the idolatrous story of the dominant culture.

We can hardly begin to address such an important issue in a short article. However, New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos has made three closely related and interlocking

observations on the Bible’s teaching on the church; I believe these observations are a solid foundation upon which we may build our discussions and doctrines..


First, Ridderbos believes that the New Testament offers two fundamental perspectives on the church. On the one hand, the church is *the people of God*—there is continuity with God’s people in the Old Testament. That story helps to define who we are. In fact, the majority of the one hundred or so New Testament images of the church are taken from the Old Testament. On the other hand, the church is *the body of Christ*—there is discontinuity. The advent of the end-time kingdom in Jesus and by the Spirit brings something fundamentally new. The remaining New Testament images of the church describe in one way or another what is made new with the coming of Christ.

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Because of the continuity between the New Testament church and an Old Testament Israel, one must carefully attend to the Old Testament in order to understand the church today. Indeed, the Gospels picture Jesus as an end-time shepherd, promised by the prophets, whose main task is to gather and renew Israel. This gathered community becomes the nucleus of the new covenant people of God who are gathered from all nations. So it is no wonder the

New Testament employs so many Old Testament images to define the church’s identity. It is essential, therefore, to understand the identity and role of God’s people in the Old Testament story.

When we look back into the Old Testament we see a number of things that define this community. They are a people who have been *chosen* by God, who has made them his own out of the depths of his love. They are a people who are bound to God in *covenant*, an image chosen from the ancient near east to describe the kind of relationship they had with God. They are a people who have been *redeemed* by God, liberated from idols and other lords to serve God alone. They are a distinctive or *holy* people called to live in God’s way over against the idolatrous ways of the nations. They are a people in whom God’s loving, renewing, and judging *presence* dwells. They are a people who have been chosen, bound in covenant, redeemed to be a holy community, 

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► **Who and Whose Are We?**

who know God’s presence *for the sake of the world*. God’s mission is to draw all nations, indeed the whole creation, to himself. And so God’s work begins in his people to whom he will finally gather all nations and the whole creation.

Israel’s failure to live up to their identity led to God’s judgment. However, the prophets promised that Israel would still be gathered and renewed so they could carry out their vocation. And, indeed, Jesus comes, gathers them, and in his death and resurrection accomplishes the salvation of God’s end-time kingdom. With the outpouring of the Spirit the newly gathered people of God now experience that new life of the kingdom. Thus, the New Testament church is the gathered and renewed Israel. Now in Christ, they are chosen by God, bound in covenant to him, and redeemed from idols to serve the living God. They are a distinctive people in whom God’s presence dwells for the sake of the nations.

In spite of all the similarities, we see the discontinuity between the church and the Old Testament people of God. The decisive events that stand at the center of the biblical story—the work of Christ: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and his gift of the Spirit—have ushered in God’s end-time kingdom. There is a new power at work in the world; God’s Spirit will renew, heal, liberate, and restore. And the church shares in that new life.

This leads us to Ridderbos’ second observation: the church must be defined in terms of the coming kingdom. The “new” of the New Testament church is largely eschatological in nature. Ridderbos tells us that we must picture kingdom and church in terms of two concentric circles. The outer circle is the kingdom of God and the inner circle is the church. God’s rule is over the whole creation, but the church is the community where that rule is acknowledged and experienced. God’s reign is broader than the church—it is over the whole world and all of human society—but the church is a picture and firstfruit of that reign that will one day extend to all things.

We might define the relationship of the church to the kingdom in three statements.

The church, therefore, is like an ellipse with two foci. Around the first it is rooted in the source of its life and mission. ... The other focus is its engagement with the world.

First, the church is the place where the eschatological kingship of God in Jesus Christ becomes visible. God’s people now experience the end-time salvation of the kingdom. Since the Spirit has been given, they have been given a foretaste of the cosmic renewal that will one day fill the earth. As such they are previews of that future salvation in the midst of the world.

Second, the church serves the kingdom by announcing the good news that Jesus is Lord over all. This time is a time of the gathering all the nations of the earth into a community that shares in the salvation of the kingdom. This gathering through announcing the gospel is an eschatological event (Matt. 24:14). The already-not-yet era of the kingdom is characterized by the proclamation of the kingdom and the gathering of all nations into the kingdom community.

Third, the church is engaged in the struggle of Christ’s kingdom in this world against the destructive powers of darkness in all areas of life as a witness to Christ’s all-embracing lordship. God’s people have taken a new form: they are now a non-geographical and non-ethnic community that lives in the midst of all nations. This creates a challenge that God’s Old Testament people did not face. In the Old Testament, Israel lived as a nation with their own story, their own culture, their own social institutions, all shaped by God’s word. The church of today, on the other hand, must live as members and participants of cultures that are formed by a different story that does not acknowledge Christ as Lord. For God’s people today, living counter to the idolatrous

ways of their culture is a much more difficult and complex vocation as they engage the struggle of Christ’s kingdom against the powers of darkness across the spectrum of human life.

And this brings us to the last observation by Ridderbos: In the New Testament the word “church” can refer to *both* the people of God across the whole breadth of their lives as the new humanity *and* to a specific institution gathered and organized for so-called “religious” activities. So far we have primarily viewed the church from the angle of the first: it is the new humanity gathered to be a sign of the God’s rule over all of human life. But “church” can also refer to a specific gathered community organized to carry out various activities that build up and nourish the life of the kingdom.

The missional engagement of the church with its culture surely demands a people who are deeply nourished in their new life in Christ—and this nourishment happens within those specific churches. Acts 2:42 describes a community devoted to the Word of God, fellowship, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. Each of these function as channels whereby the Spirit strengthens the life of the new creation. Likewise, Paul shows us the importance of the upbuilding work of the church in various places (e.g., Eph. 4). The strengthening of the inner life of the church for its missional engagement is absolutely necessary.

The church, therefore, is like an ellipse with two foci. Around the first it is rooted in the source of its life and mission. This is when the people of God are gathered together for the renewal of their life in Christ. Worship, prayer, Scripture, sacraments, and fellowship are the means whereby that happens. The other focus is its engagement with the world. The church is built up for the sake of mission to embody the life of the kingdom in the midst of its culture. The people of God go forth to give themselves for the sake of the world. Here service, mercy, justice, faithful obedience in all cultural callings, and evangelism define God’s people.

With the two foci comes a twofold danger—sacralization and secularization. Sacralization takes place when only the “gathered” or “institutional” focus of the ellipse is in view. The people of God remain

within the boundaries of the institutional church. They are turned inward, preoccupied with their rites and institutional practices as an end in themselves. Secularization stresses the “sent” focus. Here the people of God are so immersed in the world that they are assimilated and conformed to the idolatrous currents of the culture. The ministries

and activities that nourish new life and a distinct identity are diminished or even eclipsed. Solidarity with culture trumps antithesis. Both are betrayals of what God has called the church to be.

I suppose it is possible that a seven-year-old child, when confessing “I believe one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” has an

instinctive sense of some of this if they live in a healthy church. However, I believe that twentieth-century theologians have been right to struggle with the question of “What is the church?” It is of utmost importance for the church to continue to reflect deeply on its identity and the role it is called to play in the biblical story.

Why Join a Church?

When Ryan and Clarice married and moved far from their home communities it was their intention to join a local church. Clarice was a member of a CRC church and Ryan was RCA.

The first few months after the move they attended the local CRC church. They did not find the minister or the style of music to their liking. Then they began visiting the RCA church close to their home. They didn’t find it any more to their liking, so they began to attend a large non-denominational American evangelical church. The preacher was engaging and the music was more their style. They continued to worship there every Sunday morning.

After a year of regular attendance they still had not joined the church. They were uncomfortable with contacting their home churches about a membership transfer and were unclear what the membership process in the new church involved. Not joining seemed to have some advantages. Although they contributed money in the offering plate each week, they avoided the financial expectations of regular members. It also allowed them the option of skipping out of other responsibilities of membership: no nursery duty, no potluck preparation, no committee obligations. It gave them an informal anonymity that allowed them to do as they pleased. And it gave them an easy out if the worship ever changed. If a new minister came or the music became unpleasant, they could pick up and leave. Clarice’s parents wished that she and Ryan would join

the local CRC, but were grateful they regularly attended worship services.

The experience of Ryan and Clarice is not unusual. When Christian young people go off to college, they may worship on Sunday at a local church but their membership remains with their home church. Over time their membership in a distant family church seems increasingly irrelevant. This pattern of attending church without joining it follows many after graduation.

Here are the facts. In the 2012 General Social Survey it was found that in the United States, 20 percent of a nationally representative group were not part of an organized faith, a huge rise from 8 percent in 1990. More than 33 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds claimed “no religion,” compared to just 7 percent of those 75 and older. (The survey distinguishes individuals who

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are unchurched from those who claim to be atheists. The latter group is still only 3 percent of the population.)

The question for this short essay is whether choosing to affiliate formally with a local church is important. I will consider the question in two stages: first, by probing an underlying reason why many adults don’t officially join a church; and second, by examining the important biblical reason for joining a church.

An Underlying Reason for Not Joining

Some young people who have grown up attending church have a mistaken view of what a church is, and what church membership means. They think a church is like a retail store—a place where you go to get some things that you may need. What is it that a church offers that someone may need? The answer to that question is not the same for everyone. For some, going to church is a kind of habit they acquired in their youth. Sunday mornings just don’t seem quite right if you don’t go to a worship service. For some the music may be the draw. They may like the familiar songs, or the praise band, and the opportunity to sing along—a kind of group karaoke. Some may find the preacher inspiring or good at offering practical advice. Still others may enjoy the opportunity to see friends, like going to a coffee shop. When a person finds what she needs at a church she returns to the same church over and over, like many people who keep

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