

FOUNDATIONS OF
EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

SOJOURNERS AND STRANGERS

THE DOCTRINE OF
THE CHURCH



GREGG R.
ALLISON

JOHN S. FEINBERG, GENERAL EDITOR

“I believe that the doctrine of the church will be the most urgent locus of theological reflection over the next generation. In *Sojourners and Strangers*, Gregg Allison clears the ground by presenting a thoroughly biblical ecclesiology, at once comprehensive in scope and sensitive to nuance. A welcome addition to an important series.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University; general editor, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

“This is a timely, thorough, biblical, practical, and helpful book on the church. It helps us to understand Jesus’ church, and to love her and serve her as Jesus does. Having heard Dr. Allison teach this content, I am thrilled it’s finally in print.”

Mark Driscoll, Founding and Preaching Pastor, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington; Founder, Resurgence; Co-founder, Acts 29; *New York Times* #1 best-selling author

“The doctrine of the church is one that continues to divide Christians, and especially Protestants, from one another. Dr. Gregg Allison has grasped this thorny nettle and produced a book that presents both the basic principles that unite us and the controversies that continue to produce different ecclesial formations. He maintains his own conservative, Reformed Baptist convictions while being fair to those who hold other views, making his book a valuable contribution to our understanding of this vitally important subject.”

Gerald Bray, author, *God Is Love*

“I am a full-time pastor, and therefore I must be a full-time theologian. As a pastor, my highest calling is to honor Jesus by shepherding his flock. As a theologian, my highest calling is to laud Jesus publically as the hope of the world. Quite frankly, I need help as I deal with real life difficulties that I could not fictionally create. Dr. Allison’s work in *Sojourners and Strangers* is the most helpful, theologically driven manual for leading in the church. If you buy it, you’ll wear it out.”

Tyler Jones, Lead Pastor, Vintage21 Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; Regional Director, Acts 29 Church Planting Network; Founder, Advance the Church

“Gregg Allison’s *Sojourners and Strangers* is historically informed, exegetically driven, and theological precise. Even more, this timely tour-de-force ecclesiology displays a love for the church and is written for the church!”

Chris Morgan, Dean and Professor of Theology, School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University

“No longer can one regard ‘evangelical ecclesiology’ as a contradiction in terms. Among the many recent evangelical volumes on the doctrine of the church, Allison’s will undoubtedly prove to be the standard treatment for years to come. This excellent book is biblically faithful, historically informed, and pastorally relevant. One need not agree with Allison on every point of interpretation to profit immensely from his insights. I struggle to think of another volume on the subject that combines both theological depth and practical wisdom in such readable fashion as does Allison. I cannot recommend it too highly.”

Sam Storms, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; author, *Chosen for Life* and *More Precious than Gold*

“Dr. Gregg Allison has done a masterful job of writing a thorough yet practical analysis of the church. This volume is a ‘must read’ for any serious pastor or theologian who desires to look into the heart of evangelical ecclesiology. As a conservative Christian and pastor of a local church I am too quick to recommend or make decisions regarding the ‘practice’ of the local church with little thought of accountability or connectedness to the church both universal or historical. Allison brings such breadth and depth to the beauty of the church by tracing every section through the early church, Catholic Church, Reformation, and into our contemporary culture and times. I especially appreciated Gregg’s willingness to address prominent issues churches are currently struggling with—such as church governance or the ‘multisite’ movement. This book fills the void that has long existed in most evangelicals’ libraries!”

Jeffrey T. Gilmore, Senior Pastor, Parkview Evangelical Free Church,
Iowa City, Iowa

“Writing an evangelical ecclesiology is a difficult task, due to the fact that evangelicals differ on many aspects of ecclesiology. All will not agree with the positions taken by Gregg Allison in *Sojourners and Strangers*, but all will profit from his detailed study. He is especially thorough in his treatment of polity and the ordinances, and goes down some seldom-explored paths in his opening sections. At points, his arguments require careful reading, but often open up new perspectives. I commend it to students of ecclesiology.”

John S. Hammett, Associate Dean for Theological Studies, Professor of
Theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author *Biblical
Foundations for Baptist Churches*

“In this comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of the church, Gregg Allison brings a depth of doctrinal reflection, scriptural understanding, and practical wisdom to bear. Interacting with various ecclesiological perspectives throughout church history and today, he provides a balanced, biblical, and up-to-date treatment of topics from the characteristics of the church, to church government, to church ministry—all informed by his understanding of the paradoxical nature of the church as both part of the world and yet looking to another Kingdom. This work will make a major theological contribution to the expanding literature on the doctrine of the church.”

Justin Holcomb, Executive Director, The Resurgence; Lead Pastor, Mars Hill
Church U-District; Adjunct Professor of Theology and Culture, Reformed
Theological Seminary; co-author, *Rid of My Disgrace*

“Gregg Allison has done evangelicals a great service with a true theology of the church. In the endless stream of books and blogs on technique and pragmatics of doing church, *Sojourners and Strangers* gives an answer to the question ‘what is a church?’ that is superbly written, soundly biblical, theologically coherent, and practically applicable. His expertise in historical theology and his experience in leadership in a variety of types of churches enrich his profound biblical insights. It is a must read for all who are serious about leadership in the church of Jesus Christ.”

Gerry Breshears, Professor of Theology, Western Seminary

Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-58134-661-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3601-4

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3602-1

EPub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3603-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Allison, Gregg R.

Sojourners and strangers : the doctrine of the church /

Gregg R. Allison.

p. cm.— (Foundations of evangelical theology series)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-58134-661-9 (hc)

1. Church. I. Title.

BV600.3.A45 2012

262—dc23

2012015397

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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“What is a church?”

At first glance, this question appears to be easily answerable. For nearly two millennia, churches have been planted and expanded, have birthed other churches and gone out of existence, have advanced and regressed, have united and divided. Whether the “sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5) or covert converts meeting underground in the catacombs of Rome or in barns in eastern France, whether an 800,000-member church in Korea or a house church in Seattle, whether a storefront church in Beirut or a thatched-roof hut in Zimbabwe, the reality of churches is undeniable. And it seems that we know what a church is.

Upon further reflection, the question “What is a church?” presents a quandary. One reason for this, as hinted above, is the vast diversity of groups, assemblies, even denominations laying claim to the title “church.” One such entity, the Roman Catholic Church, insists that it and it alone is the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” church.¹ Opposed to this claim since their inception, Protestant churches have articulated the “marks of the church,” essential elements that distinguish “true” churches from the “false” (i.e., Roman Catholic) church. Among these Protestant churches are hundreds of variations, including many different types of evangelical churches. Though certainly not as diverse, the Orthodox Church has its various national manifestations—the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and so on. This dizzying array of remarkable and oftentimes confusing diversity renders any answer to the question “What is a church?” quite complicated. Indeed, Howard A. Snyder, focusing his attention on just evangelical churches, has remarked, “I will argue that while there *is* such a thing as evangelical ecclesiology, we might more appropriately speak of evangelical *ecclesiologies*, in the plural, and ask what each variety might contribute to the whole.”²

¹Although segments of the post-Vatican II Church largely minimized this exclusivist claim to be the only true church, Pope Benedict XVI clarified the issue by reiterating the historic position of the Church: because it and it alone possesses apostolic succession, the Catholic Church is the only true church. Accordingly, the Pope specifically denied that Protestant churches constitute true churches. See the *motu proprio* (July 10, 2007) of Pope Benedict XVI, “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html, accessed June 17, 2011.

²Howard A. Snyder, “The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 77. Such a comment is substantially different from the notion of multiple, divergent ecclesiologies that reflects a presupposition that the New Testament is itself so characterized by different theologies (and, hence, ecclesiologies) that any attempt to amalgamate those diverse strands so as to fashion a somewhat unified theology (or ecclesiology) is both naïve and

Snyder articulates a second reason for the difficulty in answering the question “What is a church?” “Today, evangelical ecclesiology is (as usual!) in major transition.”³ He could have said this with reference to most current evangelical doctrines. On my bookshelves I have numerous theological works with words like “reforming” and “revisioning” in their titles. It seems, indeed, that most if not all evangelical theological formulations—e.g., the doctrine of God, theological anthropology, the atonement of Christ—are up for reconsideration and restatement today. The doctrine of the church is no exception, as a growing number of evangelicals are addressing and seeking to reformulate ecclesiology. If once there was a paucity of reflection on the doctrine of the church, it is certainly no longer the case today as a steady stream of books on evangelical ecclesiology are being published (not to mention conferences, training summits, websites, blogs, and the like).⁴ And I doubt that this situation is what it is because of what J. C. Hoekendijk wrote: “In history a keen ecclesiological interest has, almost without exception, been a sign of spiritual decadence. . . .”⁵ Without commenting on the state of spirituality today, I do take the current “keen ecclesiological interest” as an encouraging sign. But the growing amount of material on the doctrine of the church and the transition underway in evangelical ecclesiology complicate attempts at answering the question “What is a church?”

For these and other reasons, the task set before me—to write a new evangelical ecclesiology as part of Crossway’s Foundations of Evangelical Theology series—was daunting. Yet, I was encouraged to take it on by John Feinberg, my former professor, good friend, and general editor of the series. His work with me on this volume has been immense, challenging, beneficial, and greatly needed. I deeply appreciate his friendship and editorial work. I can say the same for Al Fisher at Crossway, for he kept me focused on the task and was always an encouragement personally. Bill Deckard is a master editor

impossible. See, for example, Graham H. Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s View of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 3. Snyder’s idea is also different from “unsynthesized surveys of New Testament ecclesiologies” (Markus Bockmuehl, “Is There a New Testament Doctrine of the Church?” in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 36). An example of such a survey is Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson, *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology in Honor of J. M. P. Sweet* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997).

³Snyder, “Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 103.

⁴For example, the following significant works on ecclesiology have been published in the last two decades: Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); David Smith, *All God’s People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1996); Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Brad Harper and Paul Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁵J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Mission* 41 (1952): 325.

whose meticulous corrections and fine suggestions have made this a better, more readable book. Informally, numerous other people have contributed to this book by way of reading and critiquing it, including my former colleagues at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, and my current colleagues at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Special mention must be made of Gerry Breshears, Bruce Ware, Steve Wellum, Chad Brand, Peter Gentry, and Greg Wills.

Several of my Garrett Fellows as well as participants in my Systematic Theology 3 course, my PhD seminars on ecclesiology, the PhD colloquium on ecclesiology at SBTS, and friends have read and commented on rough drafts of chapters and/or the entire work. Special thanks goes to Reid Monaghan, Aaron O’Kelley, George Cochran, Chris Bosson, Ryan Lister, Chris Bonts, Chris Clemans, Wayne Shealey, Matt Wireman, Greg Gilbert, Jason Allan, Oren Martin, Jeremy Kimble, Micah McCormick, Karl Schumacher, Jinse Kim, Soon Park, Jeremy Pierre, Lee Tankersley, Toby Jennings, Greg Jackson, Joshua Boswell, Timothy Harris, Michael Galdamaz, Michael Williams, Robbie Sagers, Phillip Bethancourt, Matthew Barrett, Luke Stamps, Kevin Webb, James Risner, Jedidiah Coppenger, Ryan Bishop, Ryan Brandt, Eric Britt, Grant Gaines, Ricky Hardison, David Knierim, Brent Parker, Darryl Pepper, Kenneth Reid, Adam Winters, Michael York, Matthew Claridge, Sung-Hyun (Joseph) Baik, William Brooks, Derek Brown, J. T. English, Joshua Jean, Walter (Scott) Lamb, John LaRue, John Morrison, Seth Osborne, Daniel Patterson, Andrew Record, David (Gene) Roberts, and John Wind. Several churches—Good Shepherd Community Church (with Steve Keels) near Portland, Oregon; Sojourn Community Church (with Daniel Montgomery) in Louisville, Kentucky; Grace Community Church (with Rod Bunton) in Tallahassee, Florida; Calvary Baptist Church (with Matt Burton) in Elgin, Illinois; All Nation’s Church (with Bob Altstadt) near Cincinnati, Ohio; Vintage21 Church (with Tyler Jones) in Raleigh, North Carolina; Immanuel Church (with Ray Ortlund Jr.) in Nashville, Tennessee; and my “Missional Ecclesiology” courses for Re:train (with Mark Driscoll/Mars Hill Church/Acts 29) in Seattle, Washington—have allowed me to experiment on them as I have taught parts of this book in sermons, retreats, Sunday school classes, courses, or special forums. Being the chairman of the board at Hinson Memorial Baptist Church in Portland and working with the leadership there (Bruce Boria, to whom this book is dedicated, and scores of others) taught me much about ecclesiology and actually how to “do church.” Their help has been immensely beneficial. Additionally, being an elder at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville and working with the other elders (Daniel Montgomery, to whom this book is also dedicated, and many others) is teach-

ing me much about leading and shepherding a multisite church. Again, their help is so beneficial. Whatever appears here that is deficient or in error is my responsibility, not theirs. Throughout the writing of this book, my family—Nora, Lauren and Troy, Hanell and Mike, and Luke—was a constant source of encouragement, and I am continuously thankful for their support.

Finally, something else Snyder said (actually, the continuation of his earlier comment) gave me great encouragement to write this volume: “Today, evangelical ecclesiology is (as usual!) in major transition. Precisely for that reason, it faces a large opportunity. What better time to elaborate an ecclesiology that is soundly biblical and evangelical, prophetic and movemental, theologically coherent and sociologically aware, and functional for effective witness to the kingdom of God in an age of rapid globalization?”⁶ Though I have not aimed at all these elements and have formulated my doctrine of the church with reference to other core values, I have appreciated Snyder’s challenge to elaborate this ecclesiology. Whether I have succeeded in the task awaits your reading and assessment and, ultimately, the evaluation of Jesus Christ, the head of the church and the one who redeems and guides “sojourners and strangers” (see 1 Pet. 2:11).

⁶Snyder, “Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 103.

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIOLOGY

ECCLESIAL BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

To begin with the obvious, if you are reading this book, you are probably involved in a church, so you have already experienced the reality of the doctrine that I am treating. The same is true of most other doctrines: we experience the reality of the doctrine of God as we relate personally to him as Father, the doctrine of humanity as bearers of the divine image, the doctrine of sin as those fallen from what we should be, the doctrine of salvation as those rescued from our depravity and corruption, and the like.

These experiences shape our theology of God, humanity, sin, salvation, and other doctrines.

Because this may sound reasonable to some but disconcerting to others, let me clarify what I mean by it. As a systematic theologian and contributor to this Foundations of Evangelical Theology series, I firmly maintain that the source—the sole source—and the starting point of our theology is Scripture, the Word of God. So when I affirm that our experience shapes our theology, I am not advocating that experience should contribute to the content of our doctrinal formulation or be the jumping off point for it, because Scripture holds those honored positions. But our experience does influence our theology. And this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the doctrine of the church: our weekly engagement in our church's worship service, our observation of how our church baptizes people, our participation in our church's celebration of the Lord's Supper, our engagement in our church's missional endeavors to make the gospel known, our involvement in our church's compassionate concern for the poor and marginalized, and much more influences our ecclesiology.¹

¹Gary Badcock underscores this point, explaining that the doctrine of the church "occupies a unique place in the structure of theology. Much of what we proclaim in the Christian faith is either hidden from sight or related

If our ecclesial background, our church experience, shapes our theology, then it has influenced my formulation of the doctrine of the church that you are about to read. Accordingly, I want you to know the broad contours of my ecclesial background. I was raised in a “liberal” church in which a good Sunday would find my minister reading from the latest *Time* magazine, while a bad Sunday would feature an interpretation of his dreams. Congregational and denominational money was funneled to support such radical movements as the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society. Yet, it was in that church, through a parachurch movement of that very denomination, that I was genuinely confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ and experienced the saving work of God in my life. And I was not alone in this; scores of people in that church had similar experiences and made professions of faith in Christ. When we turned to our pastor for guidance in how to continue and grow in this newfound Christian life, he dismissively assured us that our recent experience would pass in a matter of a few weeks or months. And he was correct. Lacking any follow-up and discipleship, I and most of my friends shelved Christianity and drifted away from our conversion experience.

The following year, however, I became involved in another parachurch movement, Campus Crusade for Christ, through which I learned to make progress as a Christ-follower. I also became seriously involved in evangelism and discipleship of others, while minimally being connected with a local church. Eventually, this element of church involvement became more pronounced, and I even became co-pastor of a small evangelical Baptist church in Switzerland while continuing my work with Campus Crusade. Primarily, this increased local church association was with Baptist churches (Italian-Swiss Baptist, Baptist General Conference, Conservative Baptist) and the Evangelical Free Church of America. Most recently, my teaching career has brought me into association with churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

This quick tour is intended to highlight one thing: my association with parachurch movements and my membership in various churches and denominations has shaped me and influences this present work on ecclesiology. This ecclesial background forms part of the preunderstanding² that I bring to my formulation of doctrine, including my theology of the church. Certainly, many other factors contribute to my theological worldview: my deep appreciation

to events in the remote past or in the anticipated future However, the church is not like this. . . . [H]ere at least, something of what we say we believe in *can* be seen in space and time” (Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009], 8).

²For discussion of “preunderstanding” from an evangelical perspective, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 376–384; Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 103–114; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 98–116.

for historical theology, particularly that of the early church and the Calvinist wing of the Reformation;³ my strong commitment to the first five ecumenical councils (Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II; I also lean favorably toward Constantinople III); my cross-cultural experience; my complementarian view of human genderedness; my continuationist (not cessationist nor Pentecostal) view of spiritual gifts; and many other elements. But important for the purpose of this book, my ecclesial background and experience exert an influence on my doctrine of the church.

And so it surely is with all who read this book. Your ecclesial experience influences your ecclesiology, whether that is a well-developed, studied conviction concerning the church, or a subconscious, intuitive sense of what constitutes the church and its ministries.

To the degree that your church background intersects with some aspects of my experience, you will likely feel at home with my presentation. Likewise, to the degree that your ecclesial experience diverges from some aspects of my background, you will likely find yourself at odds with my ecclesiology. In either case, it is my hope that you will follow appreciatively the development of my ecclesiology—particularly as I ground it on Scripture, the source and starting point of theology—and that you will be benefited by the work at hand.

BASIC IDEA OF THE CHURCH⁴

So that you may know the basic direction in which I am heading in this book, I offer at its outset a summary of my ecclesiology, beginning with a definition of the church.

The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit. It consists of two interrelated elements: the universal church is the fellowship of all Christians that extends from the day of Pentecost until the second coming, incorporating both the deceased believers who are presently in heaven and the living believers from all over the world. This universal church becomes manifested in local churches characterized by being doxological, logocentric, pneumadynamic, covenantal, confessional, missional, and spatio-temporal/eschatological. Local churches are led by pastors (also called elders) and served by deacons, possess and pur-

³Indeed, throughout this book I will make regular reference to my *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011) for further reading in the historical development of the aspects of ecclesiology that I treat.

⁴The English word *church* derives from the Germanic languages whose focus on the Greek word *κυριακός* (*kuriakos*; “of the Lord”) yielded *Kirche* and *Kirk*. Romance languages, focusing on the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklēsia*), yielded the Latin *ecclesia* and its derivatives *chiesa* (Italian), *iglesia* (Spanish), *igreja* (Portuguese), and *église* (French).

sue purity and unity, exercise church discipline, develop strong connections with other churches, and celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Equipped by the Holy Spirit with spiritual gifts for ministry, these communities regularly gather to worship the triune God, proclaim his Word, engage non-Christians with the gospel, disciple their members, care for people through prayer and giving, and stand both for and against the world.

Each element of this definition requires a brief explanation at this point and will be discussed more fully as the book progresses.

The definition emphasizes at the outset that the church is the people of God or, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, "the communion of saints." In keeping with the title of this book, the church is composed of a particular people: "sojourners and strangers" (see 1 Pet. 2:11). In contrast with some common notions today,⁵ it is not a building (e.g., the red brick colonial-style building with white pillars and a steeple just a few blocks down from where we live), a denominational tag (e.g., the Presbyterian Church USA), a national or state church (e.g., the Lutheran Church of Sweden), avatars worshiping together in the virtual world of Second Life, or the Catholic Church (with its claim that "the one Church of Christ . . . subsists in the Catholic Church").⁶ Rather, the church is people; specifically, the church is the new covenant people of God. Though the people of God have existed from the beginning of the human race (one thinks especially of the people of Israel who lived under the old covenant), the church (adhering to the new covenant) did not exist prior to the first coming of Jesus Christ.⁷ He is the Redeemer who accomplished salvation through his atoning death and resurrection for the people of God who compose the church. It is through the gospel, and a response to it of repentance from sin and faith in Christ, that Christians have been saved (and by this term I mean all aspects of the mighty work of God that are commonly regarded as comprising salvation, including election, effective calling, regeneration, justification, union with Christ, adoption, sanctification, and perseverance). An additional aspect of the salvific work of God—one that is often overlooked but relates directly to the identity of the members of the church—is the incorporation of Christians into the body of Christ as he baptizes them with the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, all who are "in Christ" are *de facto* "in the church" and constitute its members.

The church consists of two interrelated elements, commonly referred to as the "universal" church and "local" churches. The universal church is the company of all Christians stretching from its inception (accomplished by

⁵By underscoring this contrast, I do not mean to imply that the uses of the term "church" in the following discussion are illegitimate. I only mean to emphasize that I will not use the term with those connotations.

⁶Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 8.2.

⁷Thus, we can speak of the one people of God consisting of different and distinguishable expressions, e.g., the old covenant people of Israel, and the new covenant people of the church.

the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and created by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost) to Christ's second coming at the end of this present age (or, more specifically, the rapture of the church prior to his return).⁸ It incorporates both the deceased believers who are currently in the presence of Christ in heaven and the living believers scattered throughout the world.⁹ Whereas the former aspect of the universal church is gathered together as the "heavenly" church, the latter aspect does not assemble, does not possess a structure or organization, does not have human leaders, and does not have a specific space-time address. These intangibles do not render the universal church any less real, however, as the next point demonstrates.¹⁰

This universal church (at least its living members) is manifested (by Christ, its head, and the Spirit) and manifests itself (through Christians associating themselves with one another) in local churches,¹¹ which are characterized by seven attributes.¹² The first three are characteristics regarding the origin and orientation of the church: it is (1) *doxological*, or oriented to the glory of God; (2) *logocentric*, or centered on the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, and the inspired Word of God, Scripture; and (3) *pneumadynamic*, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The final four are characteristics regarding the gathering and sending of the church: it is (4) *covenantal*, or gathered as members in new covenant relationship with God and in covenantal relationship with each other; (5) *confessional*, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ and common confession of the Christian faith; (6) *missional*, or identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God; and (7) *spatio-temporaleschatological*, or assembled

⁸This element of the "rapture" holds true for any eschatological position: according to amillennialism, it is the terminal point of the millennial (= church) age and the transition to the new heaven and new earth as Christ returns; according to postmillennialism, it is the terminal point of the millennial age of progressive peace and righteousness on the earth and the transition to the new heaven and new earth as Christ returns; according to historic premillennialism, it is the event that closes out the great tribulation that immediately precedes the return of Christ to set up his millennial reign on earth; and, according to pretribulational premillennialism, it is the event that precedes the great tribulation removing the church from the earth for seven years prior to the return of Christ to set up his millennial reign on earth.

⁹According to Charles Hodge, "The 'church' is the company of the redeemed here and in heaven, which constitutes one body. . . ." (Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [1878; repr., Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2008], 136).

¹⁰The nature of the relationship between the universal church and local churches is a matter of great debate; for a summary of the issues, see G. R. Evans, *The Church and the Churches: Toward an Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 106–120. My own view expresses his perspective of the relationship as one of "mutuality": "the local and particular, on the one hand, and the universal, on the other, are complementary and mutually dependent manifestations or expressions of the body of Christ" (*ibid.*, 115).

¹¹This affirmation does not mean that all redeemed people join themselves to a local congregation. For various reasons—e.g., disobedience, laziness, sickness, incarceration, lack of accessibility—some do not participate in a local church, and Christians who have come under church discipline are excommunicated, or expelled, from their church. Neither does the affirmation mean that local churches are composed solely of redeemed people. Non-Christians who are being moved by God toward salvation but who are not yet converted may participate in a church community, while other non-Christians, believing themselves to be genuine Christians, may be members of a local church.

¹²Because the universal church becomes manifested in local churches that possess these seven characteristics, it should come as no surprise that it is characterized by many of these same attributes.

as a historical reality (located in space and time) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while it lives the strangeness of ecclesial existence in the here-and-now.

Local churches are led by qualified and publicly recognized men who are called pastors or elders (or bishops or overseers) who have the responsibilities of teaching sound doctrine, governing (under the headship of Christ), praying (especially for the sick), and shepherding (leading through exemplary lifestyles). These assemblies are also served by deacons, qualified and publicly recognized men and women who serve Jesus Christ in the many church ministries. Because of divine grace and provision, local churches possess both purity and unity; because of sin, however, they must also pursue greater purity and maintain unity through both divine aid and Spirit-empowered human effort. When their members persist in sin, churches exercise discipline for the purposes of restoring erring members and rectifying entrenched sinful situations, restraining such sin-saturated realities, and preserving the honor of Christ and their own reputation. Churches also develop strong connections with other churches for the purposes of cooperative and more effective ministry, the sharing of resources, mutual accountability, and the like. And they celebrate the two ordinances of their covenantal relationship with God through Christ: the initiatory new covenant rite of baptism and the continuing new covenant rite of the Lord's Supper.

Church members are equipped with gifts, given by the Holy Spirit, and they exercise those spiritual gifts in carrying out the ministries of the church. These ministries are: worshiping the triune God, proclaiming his Word through the preaching of Scripture, engaging non-Christians with the gospel, discipling their members through education and sharing in community life, caring for people through prayer and giving, and standing both for and against the world by helping the poor and marginalized through holistic ministries and denouncing the evils wrought by sin.

From this definition one can see my basic orientation to ecclesiology: from the ontology or nature of the church flow the church's functions. As will be discussed later, a third category of approaches to this doctrine—teleological approaches—exists. I will subsume this category under my ontological orientation for reasons to be discussed then.

My task throughout this book is to explain and support this doctrine of the church. Before embarking on this task, however, I must address a number of foundational issues. These introductory matters will set forth how I will construct my ecclesiology.¹³

¹³I acknowledge how unusual this approach is. The textbook assigned for my seminary theology course that treated ecclesiology (together with eschatology)—Robert L. Saucy's *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1972)—and the class lectures on ecclesiology (from S. Lewis Johnson, at Trinity Evan-

ECCLESIOLOGY AS A DOCTRINE

As a *locus*, or topic, commonly included among the other *loci* of systematic theology—the doctrines of Scripture, God, angels, humanity, sin, Christ, Holy Spirit, salvation, and eschatology—*ecclesiology* comes from two Greek terms, ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), or church, and λόγος (*logos*), or word/study. Accordingly, ecclesiology is the study of the church, and this doctrine treats the issues of the church's definition, covenantal relationship with God, relationship to Israel and the kingdom of God, characteristics, governance, ordinances, and ministries. As a doctrine of evangelical theology, ecclesiology considers biblical affirmations about the church and synthesizes all those teachings into a coherent whole, thereby setting forth what evangelicals are to believe today about the church. This systematic theology of the church is developed in conjunction with other disciplines. "Exegetical theology seeks to determine the meaning of biblical texts. Biblical theology describes the progressive revelation found in Scripture by examining the theology of its various groupings (e.g., the theology of the Pentateuch and the theology of the Synoptic Gospels). It also traces the many themes in these biblical groupings and notes their development over time. . . . Historical theology is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past."¹⁴ Through solid interpretation of all relevant texts of Scripture treating the topic of the church (exegetical theology), careful consideration of themes about the church in, for example, Pauline literature and Peter's writings and how they relate to each other (biblical theology), and aided by wisdom from the past in terms of a chastened tradition concerning the church (historical theology), a systematic theology of the church—ecclesiology—is developed.

THE SCOPE OF ECCLESIOLOGY

The Sufficiency of Scripture

The preceding section emphasized the importance of Scripture in the construction of ecclesiology. Such attention to the Word of God is a hallmark of evangelical theology and flows from, *inter alia*, the Protestant affirmation of

gelical Divinity School, 1985) did not engage in a prolegomena to the doctrine of the church. Indeed, most ecclesiology books—e.g., James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868); D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887); John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology, Second Part: A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1859); Edmund Clowney, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1996); David L. Smith, *All God's People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint/Victor, 1996)—do not offer any prolegomena for their ecclesiology.

¹⁴ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 32, 23. For further discussion, with a particular emphasis on how historical theology plays an important role for exegetical, biblical, systematic, and practical theology, see 32–33.

the sufficiency of Scripture. As Wayne Grudem explains, “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”¹⁵ In terms of how this attribute of Scripture is relevant for the doctrine of the church, the issue becomes, is Scripture sufficient for the construction of our ecclesiology? The answer will fall somewhere in three different camps.

The first view is that *Scripture is not sufficient* for the development of ecclesiology. Most evidently, this is the position of the Catholic Church. Because of its commitment to divine revelation being transmitted through two distinct modes—sacred Scripture and holy Tradition—the Church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone.”¹⁶ Catholic Tradition, therefore, provides further divine revelation for the Church in terms of its formulation of ecclesiology. In a very different way—informally, rather than formally—other churches and denominations hold to the insufficiency of Scripture, erecting church traditions (e.g., how the Lord’s Supper is served, the placement of the pulpit in the sanctuary, the use of hymns rather than choruses) that rival and perhaps even trump Scripture for authority in determining their ecclesiological doctrine and practices. All of these different perspectives deny for different reasons the sufficiency of Scripture for the development of ecclesiology.

The second view is that *Scripture is wholly sufficient* with regard to ecclesiology. This sufficiency extends not only to all general areas on which Christians of all stripes find themselves in agreement (e.g., the church is the body of Christ, with Christ as the head and officers or ministers functioning as leaders of local churches under his lordship). It also encompasses all specific areas that have historically divided the church (e.g., a specific form of church government). For example, Robert Reymond, articulating a Presbyterian ecclesiology, explains,

[O]ur Presbyterian forefathers, taking the sufficiency of Holy Scripture seriously with respect to church government, appealed to Scripture alone. . . . They perceived clearly that to believe that the Word of God is insufficient in its instruction for ordering the church’s government and affairs is, first, to imply that Christ is not adequately or effectively ruling over and guiding his church, second, to overturn Christ’s unique and absolute headship over his church, and thereby, third, to open the door for men to substitute their

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 127.

¹⁶ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 9.

wills and desires as the standard of what should be ordered and done in Christ's church.¹⁷

While some would disagree with Reymond's specific interpretation of sufficient Scripture—which in his case results in the Presbyterian model of church government—this does not mean that they would disagree with his contention that Scripture is sufficient, even for matters of ecclesial oversight. Indeed, most congregationalists would insist that the sufficiency of Scripture demonstrates that their model of church government is the correct one.¹⁸ It is the interpretation, not the sufficiency, of Scripture that is the issue, for Scripture is considered to be wholly sufficient for the development of ecclesiology.

The third view is that *Scripture is sufficient in all those areas in which it aims to be sufficient* with regard to ecclesiology. For example, proponents of this perspective may hold that Scripture is sufficient for prescribing the essential marks of the church to be the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Thus, and because of the sufficiency of Scripture in this realm, for any church to be a true church, it must focus on these two elements. At the same time, these proponents may hold that Scripture is not sufficient with regard to the form of church government that should be adopted. Though Scripture indeed addresses the matter of governance, other sources contribute to the determination of how the church is to be governed. A case in point is the Anglican Communion. According to the preface to the Ordinal of the Book of Common Prayer, "It is evident unto all men diligently reading *holy Scripture and ancient Authors*, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishops, Priests, and Deacons."¹⁹ As far as the churches of the Anglican Communion are concerned, the threefold ministry does not derive solely from Scripture but from both Scripture and the writings of the early church Fathers. Moreover, these churches do not affirm that the three-tiered ministry was instituted by apostolic decision; rather, they claim it has been in place since the apostles' time (with no comment on the extent of the apostolic responsibility for the threefold division). This example demonstrates the third position, which affirms the sufficiency of Scripture for what

¹⁷Robert Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 90.

¹⁸This position is what James White, who meshes a plurality of elders with a congregational polity, argues: coming "with a mandate that flows from [his] dedication to the sufficiency of the inspired Word," White concludes, "the form of the local church, made up of elders and deacons, is not only God's intention for the church, but . . . in the giving of these offices, the church is given everything she needs to accomplish what God intends for her to accomplish in this world" (James R. White, "The Plural-Elder-Led Church: Sufficient as Established—The Plurality of Elders as Christ's Ordained Means of Church Governance," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 255, 258).

¹⁹Ordinal, Book of Common Prayer, preface (emphasis mine), <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/Ordinal.htm>, accessed June 13, 2011.

it aims to be sufficient in, while denying such sufficiency for other aspects of ecclesiology.²⁰

My personal position on this matter is that *Scripture is wholly sufficient* with regard to ecclesiology (the second position). This view will become particularly important and apparent when I address the issues of worship and church government. But my affirmation of Scripture's sufficiency will be evident throughout this book as I make constant reference to Scripture, wherever it makes affirmations that are pertinent to ecclesiology.

Other Sources

Several other sources vie for consideration in the formulation of the doctrine of the church, and I want to address two in particular: the social sciences and liturgical theology.

Given the interdisciplinary context in which scholarly theological discussions are developed today, a comment about interaction with other disciplines, especially the social sciences, is in order. Though a fairly recent addition to the "evangelical toolbox" for theological construction, the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, psychology, sociology) have become paramount in the last several decades, and many evangelicals are turning to them for building their doctrine of the church.

A leading example of this was Stanley Grenz, whose theological method included the source of culture (in addition to the sources of Scripture and historical theology).²¹ For example, Grenz explored the idea of boundaries, looking at both biblical affirmations and set theory.²² From the latter came two notions of sets: a "bounded set" and a "centered set." Grenz applied set theory to ecclesiology:

Viewing the category *Christian* as a bounded set launches us on a quest to determine which beliefs and practices identify persons as Christians and separate them from non-Christians. It leads as well to a keen desire to differentiate clearly between persons who are Christians and those who are not, doing so on the basis of outward manifestations such as adherence to certain beliefs and conformity to certain practices. . . . (V)iewing the category *Christian* as a centered set shifts the focus away from attempts to define the church by appeal to its boundaries. Rather the emphasis is on

²⁰For further discussion, see Roger Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK; and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 9–10.

²¹Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 25–26. Grenz's first source was Scripture; second, historical theology; third, culture.

²²Stanley J. Grenz, "Die begrenzte Gemeinschaft ('The Boundaried People') and the Character of Evangelical Theology," *JETS* 45/2 (June 2002): 301–316. Grenz relied on Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 113–127. Though Grenz focused on the nature of evangelical theology and applied the discussion to the Evangelical Theological Society, Hiebert's writing addressed missiological issues and, by extension, ecclesiology. It is this application that I make here.

Christ as the defining center of the church, and the church is seen as a people gathered around—or in relationship to—Christ.²³

Whatever one may make of this proposal, it serves only as an example of how social science considerations can be called into service for the formation of ecclesiology.²⁴

Without minimizing the important role of the social sciences, given the fact that I am charged with the task of constructing a theology of the church—and that such doctrine is to be developed from Scripture, not from these other disciplines—I will not bring social science considerations into the formation of my ecclesiology.²⁵

Because of the growing interest in liturgical theology as a source for ecclesiology, a comment on this discipline is in order. *Liturgical theology*, in its primary sense, can be defined as the discipline that studies the nature, attributes, and mighty works of God (*theology*, used in its narrower sense as the doctrine of God, or *theology proper*) employing as its source the liturgy—the actual experience of worship—of the church (*liturgical*).²⁶ In the hands of some theologians, liturgical theology has taken on a secondary sense. In this case, it can be defined as the discipline that studies the nature, attributes, and ministries of the church (*theology* in its broader sense as the doctrines of Christianity, including ecclesiology), employing as its source the liturgy—the actual experience of worship—of the church (*liturgical*). Liturgical theology developed from “the formula *lex orandi est lex credendi*” (‘the rule of praying is the rule of belief’),²⁷ emphasizing that the liturgical practices of the church at worship—its singing, praying, celebrating the

²³Grenz, “*Die begrenzte Gemeinschaft* (‘The Boundaried People’) and the Character of Evangelical Theology,” 306–307.

²⁴For two concrete examples of how viewing the church not as a bounded set but as a centered set is becoming a hallmark of emerging/emergent/missional churches, see Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 190–195; and Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 237–240.

²⁵Ralph Del Colle seems to concur with this approach (Ralph Del Colle, “The Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 249–250).

²⁶Gordon W. Lathrop is a leading liturgical theologian. He notes the task of liturgical theology: “It inquires into the meaning of the liturgy, to use the ancient name of the assembly for worship and its actions. As theology, as word-about-God, it does so especially by asking how the Christian meeting, in all its signs and words, says something authentic and reliable about God, and so says something true about ourselves and about our world as they are understood before God. Liturgical theology is ‘the elucidation of the meaning of worship,’ and as theology, it is ‘the search for words appropriate to the nature of God’” (Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 3). The quotation in Lathrop is from another leading liturgical theologian: Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), 14.

²⁷Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 48. As he rightly notes, the formula derives from an expression of Prosper of Aquitaine, a fifth-century monk, who said, *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (“let the rule of supplicating establish the rule of believing”) (Jacques Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 51, col. 209; for further historical detail, see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980], 218, 224–227).

ordinances, and the like—shape its doctrinal formulation and, specifically for our purposes, its ecclesiology.²⁸

As already highlighted, it is a matter of fact that our church experience exerts an influence on our ecclesiology, and part of that church experience is our experience of the church at worship—the church’s liturgy. How a church performs a baptism, for example, is determined, certainly, by its theology of baptism. At the same time, however, and in some cases more strongly, the church’s actual regular administration of this ordinance is determined by how the church has always practiced baptism.²⁹ So it is with the church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper: certainly, the narratives of Jesus’ institution of this ordinance (Matt. 26:17–30 and par.) and the Pauline tradition (1 Cor. 10:14–22; 11:17–34) provide the biblical parameters governing the church’s theological understanding of the Lord’s Supper. At the same time, however, and in some cases more strongly, the church’s actual regular administration of this ordinance is determined by how the church has always celebrated the Lord’s Supper.³⁰

Acknowledging with appropriate gravity the influence of the church’s liturgy, as an evangelical who champions the authority of Scripture over all things—including the church’s actual doctrines and practices—I must and do place liturgical theology in a ministerial role in the development of my ecclesiology.³¹ All doctrines, traditions, and practices are to be chastened by Scripture, which is the *norma normans* (the norming or determining norm), not the *norma normata* (the normed or determined norm).³² And so it is with ecclesiology and the experience of the church’s liturgy. Scripture is the

²⁸ Chan provides two helpful illustrations—one positive, one negative—of the way the formula, understood in terms of liturgy shaping theology, was influential in church history. In terms of a positive example, Chan points to “the early Christians’ practice of according worship to Jesus, which played a key role in later Christological doctrine.” In terms of a negative example, he points to “the promulgation of the doctrines of the immaculate conception of Mary (1854) and the assumption of Mary (1950) in the light of widespread liturgical practice as instances where scriptural norms have failed to have a decisive control over liturgical practices” (Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 49). He closely follows the discussion in Wainwright, *Doxology*, 218–250.

²⁹ To take some examples from the actual administration of believer’s baptism: does the one to be baptized wear a white baptismal robe or shorts and a modest T-shirt? Must the one who baptizes be a pastor of the church, or might someone else (e.g., a parent of the teenager being baptized; the person who led the new convert to Christ) perform it? To learn how important and “sacred” these actual practices of baptism are for the church, try altering the elements of the ritual and observe how upset the congregation becomes!

³⁰ To take some examples from the actual administration of the Lord’s Supper: are the communion elements bread (leavened or unleavened?) and wine, little pieces of matzos (salted or unsalted?) and grape juice, or rice and sake? Must the one who officiates be a pastor of the church, or might someone else (e.g., a staff member or lay person) perform it? Again, to learn how influential these actual practices of the Lord’s Supper are for the church, try altering the elements of the ritual and observe how upset the congregation becomes.

³¹ In this approach I concur with Wainwright’s assessment: “Protestantism characteristically emphasizes the primacy of doctrine over the liturgy. The phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* is not well known among Protestants, but they would most easily take the dogmatic norm of belief as setting a rule for prayer, so that what must be believed governs what may and should be prayed” (Wainwright, *Doxology*, 251). See his entire chapter “Lex Credendi” (251–283) for a fine development.

³² As Wainwright observes, “The specific task of the theologian lies in the realm of *doctrine*. He is aiming at a coherent intellectual expression of the Christian vision. He should examine the liturgy from that angle, both in order to learn from it and in order to propose to the worshipping community any corrections or improvements which he judges necessary” (ibid., 3).

source of theology in general and the doctrine of the church in particular; accordingly, Scripture and the disciplines associated with it—as noted above, exegetical theology, biblical theology, and historical theology (in that it provides wisdom from the past in terms of proper interpretation of Scripture and formulation of doctrine in accordance with Scripture)—will be my source in the construction of my ecclesiology. Because of my commitment on the next issue, New Testament Scripture will be my focus.

THE METHODOLOGY FOR ECCLESIOLOGY

The procedures by which the doctrine of the church is constructed constitute the methodology for ecclesiology. Three crucial issues must be faced, and one's decisions on these issues will determine to a great extent one's theology of the church. The three issues are continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments; biblical language, with particular attention to the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive language; and the basic approach to ecclesiology.

Continuity and Discontinuity between the Testaments

With the methodology for developing an ecclesiology in view, one's position on the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments is of signal importance. A spectrum of views vies for consideration. It should be carefully noted that all of the positions that we will consider agree that the Old and New Testaments together compose the inspired and authoritative Word of God (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Pet. 1:19–21), that the Old Testament presentation of truth about God and his ways is necessary for Christians to grasp for their progress in holiness and maturity (1 Pet. 2:1–3), and that the Old Testament examples of justification, sin and condemnation, and the like are of great benefit for Christians today (Rom. 4:22–25; 1 Cor. 10:1–11; Rom. 15:4). Where the various views diverge is particularly in the areas of Old Testament law and prophecy, and the nature of the people of God.

Absolute continuity (e.g., reconstructionism/theonomy) maintains that the entirety of the Old Testament legal material—including its many moral laws, civil rules, and ceremonial regulations—continues in force today and thus is binding on Christians. Though the manner of observance of some of the Old Testament commands and prohibitions may have changed, their meaning and intention has not; thus, their practice is transformed but their principle is still operative. For example, the laws regarding the sacrifice of bulls and goats typified Christ and his ultimate sacrifice. Though Christians don't observe these sacrificial laws by going into the temple and offering animal blood on the altar for the forgiveness of their sins, the prin-

ciple of the necessity of an atoning sacrifice for sin continues to operate, and Christians remember that this principle and the laws related to it have been fulfilled in Christ.

Moderate continuity (e.g., many expressions of covenant theology) holds that while the Old Testament legal material generally continues in force today, it has undergone transformation in view of the many changes that have occurred with the coming of Jesus Christ and that have been enacted or verified by the New Testament. For example, because the church does not live in a theocracy (the situation of the Jews in some periods addressed by the Old Testament), the civil rules pertaining to theocratic living are no longer operative and are therefore not binding on Christians. Nonetheless, there is a general continuity between the two Testaments. For example, circumcision was the sign and seal of the old covenant, and it has been transformed into baptism in the new covenant; thus, laws related to circumcision apply in some sense to baptism. The most obvious application is the baptism of the babies of church members into the covenant community of the church.

Absolute discontinuity (e.g., hyperdispensationalism) maintains that nothing of the Old Testament legal material continues in force today and thus it is not binding on Christians. The first or old covenant has been rendered obsolete and has been replaced by the better new covenant (Heb. 8:6–13); thus, the stipulations and regulations of the Old Testament have been rendered null and void for Christians living in the new covenant. This position does not result in antinomianism—being without law—for Christians are governed by the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21). And none of this law of Christ is a carryover from the Old Testament and its laws, rules, and regulations. Though not a proponent of this view, Ryrie explains the discontinuity of the Mosaic law and the law of Christ according to the absolute discontinuity view:

All the laws of the Mosaic code have been abolished because the code has. Specific Mosaic commands which are part of the Christian code appear there not as a continuation of part of the Mosaic Law, or in order to be observed in some deeper sense, but as specifically incorporated into that code, and as such they are binding on believers today. A particular law that was part of the Mosaic code is done away; that same law, if part of the law of Christ, is binding.³³

There is absolute discontinuity between the old and new covenants.

Moderate discontinuity (e.g., progressive dispensationalism), like the above position, holds to discontinuity between the Old and New

³³ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 305.

Testaments, with this modification: the degree of discontinuity is significant but not total. Because God revealed himself and his truth through the Old Testament, any aspect of it continues to be true and thus binding for Christians, unless Christ and the New Testament either explicitly or implicitly abrogate or modify it. Aspects of Old Testament law that continue to be valid and thus in force for Christians include among others the Ten Commandments and the law of love (e.g., “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet. . . . You shall love your neighbor as your yourself”; Rom. 13:9)³⁴ as well as regulations regarding the sanctity of human beings created in the image of God (e.g., the prohibition against abortion that derives from Ex. 21:22–25). Aspects of the law whose validity has been either explicitly or implicitly abrogated include among others dietary restrictions (1 Tim. 4:3–4; Mark 7:19) and the rules governing the sacrificial system (Hebrews 8–10). Aspects of Old Testament law whose validity has been either explicitly or implicitly modified include among others the “fulfilled” commands regarding murder, adultery, and the like (e.g., “You have heard that it was said to those of old . . . But I say to you”; Matt. 5:17–48)³⁵ and Sabbath regulations (Rom. 14:5–9; Col. 2:16–17). The Old Testament laws that continue over into the New Testament and the Old Testament regulations that have been modified by the coming of Christ, when joined with the commands and prohibitions established by Jesus Christ and the New Testament, compose the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21). Though much of the Old Testament legal material has been explicitly or implicitly done away with, those aspects that are integrated into the law of Christ continue to exercise binding authority for Christians. There is moderate discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Though the moderate continuity position and the moderate discontinuity position are mediating positions between the absolute continuity position and the absolute discontinuity position, the strong contrast between the two views must be appreciated: the former finds more continuity between

³⁴The issue of the fourth commandment regarding the Sabbath provokes the only significant debate about the Decalogue between moderate discontinuity proponents and those who take a continuity approach.

³⁵“Fulfilled” in the sense that Jesus offers his interpretation of these Old Testament rules and regulations for his disciples. In agreement with Douglas Moo’s discussion, I do not think Jesus fulfills the law (Matt. 5:17) in the sense of “giving it its real intended meaning in response to Jewish attempts to evade its full significance. . . . In the ‘antitheses’ of Matt. 5:21–48 Jesus does not simply reestablish the true meaning of the law as if he were simply exegeting the relevant OT texts.” Nor do I think that Jesus is extending the demands of the law “from the external to the internal (murder-hatred; adultery-lust).” Rather, Jesus explains that the Old Testament law is not to be abandoned—indeed, he insists that it must be taught—but it must be “interpreted and applied in light of its fulfillment by Christ.” His interpretation and application of Old Testament law—as seen in his teachings and throughout the rest of the New Testament—is authoritative for Christians of the new covenant (Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988], 204–206).

the Old and New Testaments, while the latter finds more discontinuity between the two.

My personal position on this matter is *moderate discontinuity* (the position just described). This view will become particularly important and apparent when I address the issues of the origin of the church, the relationship between the church and Israel, and baptism.

I mentioned at the outset of my discussion on this issue that the various views on continuity and discontinuity also diverge in the area of Old Testament prophecy and the nature of the people of God. Generally speaking, proponents of the first two positions find a great degree of continuity between Israel—specifically, the Jews, the people of Israel—and the church, while proponents of the latter two positions find a great deal of discontinuity between these two groups.

From a continuity approach,³⁶ the Jewish people of the old covenant and Christians of the new covenant are both part of the “people of God,” with the church having replaced Israel, such that the Jews as a national people hold no special place in the salvific work of God, either now or in the future. Concerning how this latter idea dovetails with Old Testament prophecy, the continuity approach holds that some prophecies addressed the coming of the Messiah (e.g., Isaiah 53) and have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (or will be fulfilled at his second coming); some have been forfeited by the Jews because of their refusal to recognize Jesus to be the Christ; and still others are now being spiritually fulfilled in the church (e.g., Amos 9:11–15 with Acts 15:15–17). However, no promise or prophecy of a national restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land of Israel awaits fulfillment in the future. A modification of this continuity position entertains the possibility of a future restoration of Israel.³⁷

From a discontinuity approach,³⁸ the Jewish people of the old covenant and Christians of the new covenant are very distinct groups of the “people of God,” and the church has not replaced Israel; thus, the Jews as a national people will hold a special place in the salvific work of God in the future. Concerning how this latter idea dovetails with Old Testament prophecy, the

³⁶Marten H. Woudstra, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 221–238; Clowney, *Church*, 53. Though Clowney seems to seek a balance between continuity and discontinuity, he clearly favors the former.

³⁷From the Reformed perspective, Willem VanGemeren advocates for a hope for Israel based on a hermeneutic of progressive fulfillment (Willem A. VanGemeren, “Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy,” in two parts: *WTJ* 45 [1983]: 132–144; and *WTJ* 46 [1984]: 254–297). What does it say about the state of this issue when, in a volume dedicated to the theological interpretation of the Old Testament, only a few brief comments on the church are to be found? (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, gen. ed., *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 81, 231, 233–234). In a dictionary dedicated to the same approach, only one paragraph addresses the future of national Israel (Scot McKnight, “Israel,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005], 345).

³⁸Robert L. Saucy, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 239–259.

discontinuity approach holds that some prophecies (e.g., Isaiah 53) addressed the coming of the Messiah and have been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (or will be fulfilled at his second coming); some have been forfeited by the Jews because of their refusal to recognize Jesus to be the Christ; and still others are now being partially fulfilled in the church (e.g., Jer. 31:31–34 with Heb. 8:8–13; Joel 2:28–32 with Acts 2:17–21).³⁹ Furthermore, and in contrast to these elements of Old Testament revelation, the discontinuity approach holds that the promises and prophecies of a national restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land of Israel (e.g., Deut. 30:1–10; Isa. 49:8–26; Zechariah 10) await a literal (physical) fulfillment in the future (as evidenced by Romans 11).

Again, my personal position on this matter is one of *discontinuity* (the position just described). This view will become particularly important and apparent when I address the issue of the inception of the church and its relationship to Israel.

Biblical Language: Prescription versus Description

A second methodological issue for the development of ecclesiology is one's view of the normativity or cultural relativity of certain genres (e.g., narrative) and portions (e.g., Paul's ad hoc letters to Timothy and Titus) of Scripture.⁴⁰ The issue becomes a linguistic one of *prescription versus description*. No one disputes that when Scripture offers prescriptive teaching for the church (e.g., Jesus' instructions about church discipline; Matt. 18:15–20), these prescriptions must be incorporated into one's ecclesiology and become normative for all churches. The line of division is drawn, however, between those who incorporate biblical descriptions of the church into their ecclesiology and insist that these elements are normative for all churches, and those who hold that, whereas such narratives describe the early church and its practice, and because of the descriptive (not prescriptive) nature of narratives, these elements *may be* incorporated into churches today but do not necessarily *have to be* incorporated. Putting this into question format and focusing on the narrative of Acts,

Should we take Acts as *normative* so that the church of all times should imitate the experiences and practices of the early church? Or should we read Acts as merely *descriptive* of what was valuable and inspiring in the early church, but not necessarily binding on us today? Without a doubt this is the most significant issue we face as we learn to interpret Acts. . . . The dif-

³⁹ Most proponents of discontinuity would acknowledge, in accordance with Acts 15:15–17, that the prophecy of the restoration of David's fallen tent (Amos 9:11–15) is now being spiritually fulfilled *in part* in the church, but would add that this prophecy awaits its complete fulfillment with the restoration of the Davidic dynasty during the future millennial kingdom of Jesus Christ (Revelation 20).

⁴⁰ Because I have already treated the issue of continuity and discontinuity between the two Testaments, I will focus this current discussion on the normativity of the New Testament for ecclesiology.

ficulty lies in knowing what is normative for the church today and what is not. On what basis should we make these decisions?⁴¹

In the one hermeneutical camp are those who take the descriptive narratives of Acts as *normative*: “Narrative often teaches more indirectly than didactic literature without becoming any less normative. . . . A proper doctrine of Scripture will not allow Acts to be subordinated to Paul simply because the one is narrative and the other didactic literature. Neither will it permit Paul to be subordinated to Acts because of an inherent preference by some for the phenomena of Acts (such as speaking in tongues).”⁴² In addition to this appeal to the nature of Scripture, Osborne offers another reason for affirming the normativity of biblical narratives:

Moreover, I also oppose the current tendency to deny the theological dimension on the ground that narrative is indirect rather than direct. This ignores the results of redaction criticism, which has demonstrated that biblical narrative is indeed theological at the core and seeks to guide the reader to relive the truth encapsulated in the story. Narrative is not as direct as didactic material, but it does have a theological point and expects the reader to interact with that message.⁴³

A final reason for holding to normativity is “the open-ended closing of Acts”:

An unresolved narrative was a literary device well known at the time, a means of keeping the narrative open for the readers’ involvement. . . . Thus, the summary of Paul’s unhindered yet imprisoned missionary activity in Rome (Acts 28:30–31), echoing the ideal Christian individuals and communities engaged in mission earlier in Acts and even that of Jesus (28:31), provides readers with the mandate to see their own potentially unstoppable mission as the resolution of the incomplete mission of Paul to Gentiles.⁴⁴

Thus, the descriptive narratives of Acts are seen to be *normative*.

In the other hermeneutical camp are those who insist that *description is not prescription*: “The crucial hermeneutical question here is whether biblical narratives that describe what *happened* in the early church also function as norms intended to delineate what *must happen* in the ongoing church. . . . Our assumption, along with many others, is that *unless Scripture explicitly*

⁴¹ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 263.

⁴² Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 349, 351.

⁴³ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 172. For some reason, this paragraph is not in the revised and expanded edition (2006), 220; cf. Craig S. Keener, *Gift Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 209–213.

⁴⁴ Graham H. Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s View of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 10. Interestingly, hundreds of churches are associated with “Acts 29,” a network of church planting networks that emphasizes the ongoing nature of the book of Acts.

tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way.”⁴⁵ With respect to the book of Acts, this position means that, “We are to find doctrine that is already formulated elsewhere *illustrated* in the historical narratives. This is a generally valuable principle. The structure of Christian theology should be rooted in the theological exposition and prescription of Scripture and not derived from historical incidents (which, while factual, are not necessarily normative . . .).”⁴⁶ Discussing another doctrine—that of the Holy Spirit—Bernard Ramm is even more specific: “To build a theology of the Holy Spirit primarily on the Book of Acts is contrary to the fundamental Protestant principle of interpretation: *Scripture interprets Scripture*. The great theology of the Holy Spirit is clearest in John’s Gospel and Paul’s letters. Here is where the great doctors of the church have built their doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and rightly so.”⁴⁷ Substituting the doctrine of the church for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Ramm’s viewpoint would encourage us to search elsewhere in Scripture—e.g., Matthew 16:13–20; 18:15–20; Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and his pastoral epistles—for the “clearest” theology about the church, and not in the book of Acts.

A modification of this perspective is the view that, though it is narrative genre, Acts may present normative instruction, and some of the book may be binding for churches today. How then does one decide what is and what is not normative? Fee and Stuart offer three principles “with regard to the hermeneutics of historical narrative”:

1. The Word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative was *intended* to teach.
2. What is *incidental* to the primary intent of the narrative may indeed reflect an inspired author’s understanding of things but it cannot have the same didactic value as what the narrative was intended to teach. . . .
3. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to intent. That is, if it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent, then such precedent should be regarded as normative.⁴⁸

Similarly, Duvall and Hays offer several principles (including some overlap with Fee and Stuart) for determining what is normative and what is not in the book of Acts: (1) look for what Luke intended to communicate to his readers; (2) look for positive and negative examples in the characters of the story (e.g., the selection of Matthias to replace Judas; Acts 1:15–26); (3) read

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 97 (emphasis his).

⁴⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 84.

⁴⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Rapping about the Spirit* (Waco: Texas: Word, 1974), 113.

⁴⁸ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 99.

individual passages in light of the overall story of Acts and the rest of the New Testament; (4) look to other parts of Acts to clarify what is normative (e.g., giving away all of one's possessions is not normative, according to 5:3–4); and (5) look for repeated patterns and themes.⁴⁹

I affirm the general normativity of the book of Acts. Luke wrote it for the sake of Theophilus as a continuation of the first volume written for this same friend. Luke's purpose was to tell the story of the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the Gospel of Luke) and the Holy Spirit's work through the early disciples in initiating and building the church of Jesus Christ (Acts). Consequently, Acts is a thoroughgoing theological writing of narrative genre, Luke's inspired presentation of the growth of the early church. The Holy Spirit, who spoke and acted so as to create, empower, direct, and expand the early church, and who inspired Luke to write the authoritative narrative of his (i.e., the Spirit's) work, continues to speak and act today in the church through this canonical writing. Because of its inspiration and its inclusion in the canon of Christian Scripture, Acts is intended for the authoritative instruction of the church from its inception at Pentecost until the Lord returns in the future.

When I affirm the general normativity of Acts, I mean to indicate that the book as a whole presents authoritative instruction for the church to follow (with appropriate contextualization), but not each and every detail is normative for the church. That which is normative appears in the major themes of Acts, in the emphases that are repeated, in the patterns that are established through recurrence, in the highlights that are shown again and again. Acts 1:8 is an example of a major theme of the book: the Holy Spirit's empowering propulsion of the church to spread the gospel throughout the entire world (confirmed in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 19:20).⁵⁰ The church today should be about this missional undertaking. Obedience to God rather than capitulation to wrongheaded human commands is an emphasis of the book (e.g., 4:13–22; 5:17–32; 6:8–7:60). The church will do well to have this same priority today. The apostolic preaching of the gospel—the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, together with an appeal for response resulting in the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit—is a pattern that is established (e.g., 2:22–41; 3:11–26; 5:30–32; 10:34–43).⁵¹ The church is to preach this gospel today. The impressive unity of the church is a highlight of Acts (e.g., 2:42–47; 4:32–37; threatened in 5:1–11; 6:1–7; 15:1–35). The church

⁴⁹ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 264–267.

⁵⁰ Indeed, many commentators note that Acts 1:8 is the programmatic verse for the entire writing.

⁵¹ Doriani specifies, "The principle is clear: Where a series of acts by the faithful create a pattern, and God or the narrator approves the pattern, it directs believers, even if no law spells out the lesson" (Daniel M. Doriani, "A Redemptive-Historical Model," in *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meador [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009], 89).

must strive to maintain and manifest this genuine unity today. In summary, as Thiselton notes:

Yet it would be rash to assume that the writings of Luke-Acts were other than *formative* for the wider church. Luke declares as a principle of continuity that the church continued to devote themselves “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Where the patterns of the narrative reflect regularities in Acts, Luke appears to speak beyond a single nonrepeatable situation.⁵²

Individual examples of people and events that appear in Acts are also helpful for the church today, though they may or may not be normative. Normativity applies in those cases in which Luke indicates explicitly or implicitly that the characters and activities are right and thus are to be emulated (e.g., the “noble” Bereans’ scrutiny of Scripture; Acts 17:10–12) or wrong and thus to be avoided (e.g., Ananias and Sapphira; 5:1–11).⁵³ Still, not everything is normative. Diversity in similar accounts weighs against normativity. For example, God’s blessing was on the disciples in the upper room because they were in accord with Scripture, chose candidates in accordance with high requirements, and prayed for God’s will in seeking to identify the proper replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15–26).⁵⁴ But their casting of lots does not become normative for the church in its decisions, because such a method is not found elsewhere in Acts when the church has to make important decisions (e.g., 6:1–7; 15). Also, the reception of the Spirit is part and parcel of what it means to become and live as a Christian (1:4–5; 2:38; 8:14–24; 9:17–19; 10:44–48; 11:15–18; 19:1–7), but the fact that on occasion this reception was delayed cannot be considered paradigmatic for a second blessing theology for Christians today, for Luke himself underscores the unusualness of these delays (8:16; 19:2).

In summary, by paying attention to Luke’s intent for the book as a whole and for each part of his writing, readers should note major themes, emphases, patterns, and highlights so as to identify the normative instruction from Acts. Normativity also applies in cases of individual characters and events when Luke indicates these are right and to be followed or are wrong and to be shunned. Diversity in details and other textual clues underscore details of the

⁵² Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 449.

⁵³ Reflecting on the genre of Acts in light of the literary conventions of Luke’s day, Twelftree affirms, “given that biographies were to be taken as model lives for readers to follow, it is likely that Luke’s descriptions of his heroes are intended to become prescriptions for his readers” (Twelftree, *People of the Spirit*, 10). Similarly, Vanhoozer speaks of “patterns of actions on the part of paradigmatic individuals” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Response to Daniel M. Doriani,” in *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, 127).

⁵⁴ Those who believe that the disciples acted prematurely in choosing Matthias (they should have waited for Paul to be appointed an apostle, so the argument goes) have no support for their view from the narrative of Acts 1:15–26; indeed, Luke’s positive presentation of this deliberation compels us to acknowledge the rightness of the church’s choice.

book that should not be raised to the level of normativity. By careful interpretation, Acts as narrative genre may be mined for its normative, authoritative theology for the construction of our ecclesiology.⁵⁵

At the outset of the discussion of this second matter of methodology, I noted that this issue of language also involves one's view of the normativity or cultural relativity of certain portions of Scripture; 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus were used as illustrations. The "problem" with these letters is that they are ad hoc in nature: they were addressed to particular situations faced by the early churches, situations that (1) at times are difficult to reconstruct (thus making interpretation of these letters more difficult), and (2) may or may not obtain in today's churches (making application even more difficult).⁵⁶

In part, proper interpretation entails careful reconstruction of the background of these letters, and right application entails making principled distinctions between cultural or time-bound elements and supracultural instructions in them. As for the first matter, judicious use of excellent commentaries can be very helpful in obtaining the background information needed for a proper interpretation of these letters. As for the second, Osborne is helpful in reminding us that this is not a matter of inspired versus uninspired and authoritative versus non-authoritative portions of Scripture; indeed, we are

... not establishing a canon within a canon (a set of superior commands) or distinguishing first-class from second-class passages. This is a matter of contextualization or application. The issue is not whether a passage is normative but whether the normative principle is found at the surface level (that is, supracultural) or at the principal level underlying the passage (with the surface situation or command applying mainly to the ancient setting). All biblical statements are authoritative; some, however, are so dependent on the ancient cultural setting that they cannot apply directly to today since there are no parallels (such as footwashing or meat sacrificed to idols). We need hermeneutical criteria to enable us to make such decisions on firm ground.⁵⁷

Such hermeneutical criteria include the following: (1) We need to distinguish between what in these letters is essential and what is not essential; essential matters are supracultural and normative, nonessential matters are not, and we are to focus our attention and efforts on the essential matters. (2) We need to distinguish between matters that are inherently moral and those that are cultural; inherently moral matters are supracultural and normative, whereas cultural matters are not. (3) Within the letters themselves, we need to distin-

⁵⁵ Graham Cole, my colleague in the Foundation of Evangelical Theology series, seems to hold a similar view (*He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006], 206–207).

⁵⁶ This issue is different from the critical issues of authorship, date, audience, and the like. I will not attempt to deal with these issues but instead will refer readers to excellent evangelical commentaries on these letters.

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 421.

guish between principle and specific application; the principle is supracultural and normative (though the specific application may vary from culture to culture), whereas the application is culturally relative.⁵⁸

To give some specific examples of these criteria at work: (1) Paul's denouncement of sinful behavior (Titus 1:10–16) is directed at essential matters like insubordination, empty chatter, the pursuit of shameful gain, defiled conscience, and the like. Throughout Scripture, sin is treated seriously and is considered a core issue; such is the case in this section of the Bible. That these essential matters are interwoven with certain nonessential matters—Paul attaches some of this evil behavior to “the circumcision party” and “the Cretans”—must not be allowed to deflect the current church's attention away from these sins. Such sins constitute core issues and must be exposed, denounced, and overcome by the church today. (2) The lists of qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3) set forth the personal and spiritual characteristics for church leaders, and such moral qualities indicate that these requirements are supracultural and normative. Churches today must approve their officers on the basis of these normative qualifications. Paul's concluding comments after these lists—“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim. 3:14–15)—reinforce the normativity of his instructions about church officers. (3) We can consider Paul's instructions about women's apparel in church (1 Tim. 2:9–10)⁵⁹ to include both principles (women should dress conscientiously, modestly, non-ostentatiously, and with fiscal responsibility) and specific applications (women should not braid their hair or wear gold or pearls). Women in churches today are to follow the supracultural, normative principles but are not obligated to abide by the specific applications Paul prescribed for his first-century audience. Practically, then, women in church today may braid their hair and wear gold or pearls because, given a reasonable expense, quantity, and quality, such a hairstyle and such apparel do not communicate disrespect and immodesty and do not draw inordinate attention to these women nor bankrupt the family budget.

In summary, I have attempted to offer some hermeneutical criteria for distinguishing between that which is supracultural and normative and that which is culturally relative in the ad hoc letters of the New Testament. Though no system is foolproof, and all approaches include a subjective element of assessment and a personal element of valuation, these principles

⁵⁸ Some of this comes with modification from Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 66–69

⁵⁹ Peter has a similar list in 1 Peter 3:1–7.

should be helpful for churches today. They will also help in the construction of ecclesiology as it appeals to these writings.

Basic Approaches to Ecclesiology

A third methodological issue for the development of ecclesiology is one's basic approach to the doctrine. At least three different approaches have been advocated. Simply expressed, these are functional approaches, teleological approaches, and ontological approaches.

The first approach, a *functional ecclesiology*, seeks to define and discuss the church in terms of its activities, roles, or ministries. Craig Van Gelder identifies six examples of functional approaches (together with the literature that proposes them): (1) a seeker-sensitive model, where the emphasis is on "conducting worship services shaped for evangelism of unchurched persons";⁶⁰ (2) a purpose-driven model, where the purpose of the church is defined "around core functions" and intentional discipleship takes place;⁶¹ (3) a small-group model, that "emphasizes making small groups the critical infrastructure for church life in complement with gathered celebrative worship";⁶² (4) a user-friendly model, where the emphasis is on "developing processes around key biblical principles that attract people into high commitment communities";⁶³ (5) a seven-day-a-week model, where the emphasis is on "expanding group-based, weekday ministries as multiple points of entry into the life of the church";⁶⁴ and (6) a church for the twenty-first century that emphasizes the development of the church "as a major anchor of ministry that can specialize in a variety of niche markets."⁶⁵ Others could certainly be added to this list.⁶⁶ What all of these approaches have in common is their pragmatically influenced or functionally driven ecclesiology.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Presented in George Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

⁶¹ Exemplified in Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

⁶² Promoted by Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: Revell, 1991).

⁶³ Championed by George Barna, *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991).

⁶⁴ Exhibited in Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-day-a-week Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

⁶⁵ Promoted by Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1992).

⁶⁶ For example, the externally focused model, that emphasizes service to the community through partnerships with service organizations (Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* [Loveland, CO: Group, 2004]; cf. Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001]). What concerns me is that critiques of "the North American evangelical church" (whatever that broad statement refers to) are commonly criticisms of its functions (e.g., its evangelism, leadership, worship, and preaching). What may be advocated in terms of a solution turns out to be little more than replacing certain methods of engaging in these functions (methods supposedly developed within modernity, such as CEO-style leadership structures and expository sermons) with new ways of doing them (ways allegedly developed within postmodernity [perhaps reclaimed from premodern orthodoxy], such as artistically beautiful worship and narrative-based preaching). If I am correct, and the functions of the church flow out of its nature, then an approach that replaces one set of functions with another set of functions while bypassing the more fundamental issue of the church's ontology is insufficient and may only exacerbate the problem. For an example of this incomplete approach, see David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

⁶⁷ At first blush, one might be tempted to include the churches of the Reformation because of their focus on the marks of the church. These activities purportedly distinguished the (false) Roman Catholic Church from the

Finding this functional approach to ecclesiology lacking an essential element, others take a second approach, a *teleological ecclesiology*, that attempts to define and discuss the church in terms of its *telos*, or purpose/goal. An example of this is Jonathan R. Wilson's ecclesiology as set forth in *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice*. His key point, developed from Alasdair MacIntyre, is that "practices cannot be isolated from the whole life of a community and the relationships internal and external to it. Nor can practices have meaning apart from the community's conception of the *telos* toward which it is moving."⁶⁸ Focusing on the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20, Wilson notes that "this commissioning gives the church its *telos* and makes it clear that certain activities embody that *telos*."⁶⁹ He further expands on this idea, noting that the *telos* of the cosmos is "life in the kingdom and knowledge of Jesus Christ."⁷⁰ Specifically, worship, witness, discipleship (including the exercise of church discipline), baptism, the Lord's Supper, footwashing, the church's confession of faith, and endurance of suffering are all essential practices of the church that fulfill its *telos*. This approach is an example of a teleological ecclesiology.

The third approach is an *ontological ecclesiology* that seeks to define and discuss the church in terms of its attributes or characteristics.⁷¹ For an example of this approach, we may consider the historical attributes as affirmed by the early church in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Unity, holiness, catholicity (or universality), and apostolicity were the four specific characteristics affirmed by the earliest Christians in their discussion and confession of the nature of the church. The key is to note that early church ecclesiology had a definite ontological orientation to it.

More recently, a turn from functionalist approaches to ontology as the basic approach to formulating the doctrine of the church can be detected; an example is Simon Chan's ecclesiology. Interestingly, he indicates that one's approach to ecclesiology—either a functional approach or an ontological

(true) churches (which would later come to be called Protestant churches). These marks were considered to be either two in number—the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper—or three in number—with the exercise of church discipline being added to the first two marks. However, the Protestant churches of the Reformation period did not deny the basic ecclesiological orientation that affirmed that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Though they redefined these four historic attributes, the Reformation churches still affirmed them. At their core, therefore, the Reformation churches took an ontological approach to their ecclesiologies, adding the two or three marks so as to distinguish true churches that were one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (defined in a Protestant way) from the false church that made the same claim.

⁶⁸ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 12. Wilson particularly develops his notion of *telos* from MacIntyre's presentation in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Why Church Matters*, 17–18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷¹ Gary Badcock offers a fine response to a common critique of this approach as articulated by Nicholas Healy (Badcock, *House Where God Lives*, 1–8). He interacts with Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, Word, and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

approach—hinges on one’s answer to “the question of how the church is to be understood in relation to creation. Is the church to be seen as an instrument to accomplish God’s purpose in creation, or is the church the expression of God’s ultimate purpose itself?”⁷² Chan asserts that giving the first answer leads to a functional approach to ecclesiology, while giving the second leads to an ontological ecclesiology: “If the church is essentially instrumental, then its basic identity can be expressed in terms of its functions: what it must do to fulfill God’s larger purpose. But if the church is God’s end in creation, then its basic identity can be expressed only in ontological rather than functional terms.”⁷³ Though I disagree with some of Chan’s characterization of the instrumentalist notion of the church, I find myself in far greater sympathy with that idea than with his notion of the church as a manifestation of God’s ultimate purpose itself; yet my approach is not primarily a functional one. Indeed, I concur with Chan’s statements that the church’s “basic identity is to be found not in what it *does* but in what it *is*,” and that “the role or function of the church grows out of its ontological status. . . .”⁷⁴ However, I don’t follow him in considering the church to be “a divine-humanity” or in finding its ontological status “sometimes expressed in the concept of Mother Church, made famous by Cyprian: ‘He who has not the Church for its mother, has not God for his Father.’”⁷⁵ Thus, one’s approach—whether functional, teleological, or ontological⁷⁶—to constructing the doctrine of the church does not depend (solely) on one’s decision about the church’s relation to creation.

My approach to formulating an ecclesiology is an ontological one. I concur with Erickson’s assessment that current culture and worldview, “with its widespread aversion to philosophy, and particularly to metaphysics and ontology, is far less interested in the theoretical nature of something than in its concrete historical manifestations. Thus, much modern theology is less interested in the essence of the church, what it ‘really is’ or ‘ought to be,’ than in its embodiment, what it concretely is or dynamically is becoming. . . . [The church] is not thought of in terms of its essence, but of its existence—an openly existentialist interpretation.”⁷⁷ I bemoan this development and join my efforts with others (like Chan) to reverse this trend. Questions regarding

⁷² Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁶ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 22–23, adds another approach—*organizational*—to ecclesiology: “This organizational view defines the church in terms of its structures, procedures, and decision-making processes.” I wonder, however, if this approach is really an attempt to define the church. Van Gelder himself seems to suspect that this is the case: “An understanding of the church’s structural character is essential to a full view of the church, but this approach also leaves unaddressed some basic questions about the church’s nature” (23). Given this, I will not include *organizational* ecclesiology in my discussion.

⁷⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 1038–1040.

the nature of the church—its identity, its characteristics—are important so that we “know just what distinguishes the church as the church, or qualifies it to be called the church.”⁷⁸ My approach to ecclesiology, therefore, is an ontological approach.

At the same time, my presentation will not ignore the teleological and functional approaches to ecclesiology. As for the former, some of the attributes of the church include a certain directionality; that is, they are teleological in orientation. For example, the missional character of the church signifies that it moves centrifugally; the church (spatially) has a universal aim. This can be seen in Luke’s use of Jesus’ words to his disciples—“and you will be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8)—as a programmatic statement for his writing, which writing continues to express and shape the missional *telos* of churches today. Furthermore, the eschatological dimension of the church indicates that it possesses a finality; the church (temporally) has an ultimate (or terminal) end. This comes into view most clearly in John’s apocalyptic vision of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21–22). In this final canonical scene, the church has finished its earthly pilgrimage and yielded its humble place to the New Jerusalem, which is “the holy city” (Rev. 21:10), and the exquisitely adorned “Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (v. 9). Continuity with the penultimate reality of the church can still be observed—“the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (v. 14)—but this New Jerusalem is ultimate reality for all eternity. And it is toward this eschatological hope that the church moves. As this teleology is a part of the church’s nature and attributes, the teleological approach will be a factor in my ecclesiology.

So, too, will the functional approach be included, in this sense: from the nature of the church flow its ministries. This conviction will be seen in the fact that I discuss the identity—the characteristics—of the church toward the beginning of this book and conclude with a presentation of the church’s ministries.

Accordingly, I take an ontological approach to the construction of my ecclesiology, focusing first on identity markers of the church, while properly noting the teleological orientation of many of the church’s characteristics and while also deriving its function—its ministries and mission—from those attributes.

⁷⁸Ibid., 1040. Thus, I disagree with Michael Jinkins and his hope that “perhaps we can move beyond the uninteresting question of essence (What is ‘church’? What are the qualities of ‘churchness’?) to some really interesting questions” (Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 78). And I believe that my approach, rather than describing an abstract concept of the church that bears little or no resemblance to actual churches and that flattens out the rich diversity of actual churches, provides an important basis for such entities to substantiate their claim to be genuine churches and not just amorphous religious organizations that have no right to the name (see Jinkins, *Church Faces Death*, 69–84).

CONCLUDING QUESTION: IS ECCLESIOLOGY AN IMPORTANT DOCTRINE?

It seems fitting, before embarking on a lengthy study of the church, to raise a fundamental question: is ecclesiology an important doctrine?⁷⁹ If we were to engage in “theological triage” so as to rank Christian doctrines in their order of importance, a strong case could be made for assigning the highest rankings to the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture. Another categorization reckons “the three gigantic doctrines of atonement, incarnation, and Trinity” as the most important because these and these alone are the “three great mysteries at the very heart of Christianity.”⁸⁰ Few, if any, would elevate ecclesiology to this first tier of doctrines.⁸¹ The alternative, however, is not as bleak as J. C. Hoekendijk makes it seem: “In history a keen ecclesiological interest has, almost without exception, been a sign of spiritual decadence.”⁸² Certainly, the earliest church creeds belie this notion: the expression “believe . . . (in) the church” in both the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Apostles’ Creed indicates significant (even though not supreme) weightiness for this theological belief.

Ecclesiology may not be a doctrine of highest importance, but it is nevertheless of great importance, for this simple reason: the church of Jesus Christ itself is a necessary reality. This fact propels the Christian doctrine devoted to the study of the church to a high level of prominence.

John Webster grounds the necessary character of the church in the gospel,

⁷⁹ As Wolfhart Pannenberg points out, “It is not self-evident that the concept of the church should be a separate dogmatic theme. This was not the case either in the early church or in the Latin Middle Ages. Accepted as the content of faith and Christian teaching were the Trinitarian God, the creation of the world, its reconciliation by Jesus Christ, and the sacraments. The church did not form a separate theme in the systematic presentation of Christian doctrine until the fifteenth century. . . . The Reformers were certainly the first to introduce the doctrine of the church into dogmatics” (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 22).

⁸⁰ Fred Sanders, “Introduction to Christology: Chalcedonian Categories for the Gospel Narrative,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 8.

⁸¹ An exception would be the Roman Catholic Church, which links all theology with ecclesiology. To take the doctrine of the Trinity as an example: “To believe that the Church is ‘holy’ and ‘catholic,’ and that she is ‘one’ and ‘apostolic’ (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1995], 750). As the Presbyterian Louis Berkhof commented, “In Roman Catholic theology, however, the discussion of the Church takes precedence over everything else, preceding even the discussion of the doctrine of God and of divine revelation. The Church, it is said, has been instrumental in producing the Bible and therefore takes precedence over it; it is moreover the dispenser of all supernatural grace. It is not Christ that leads us to the Church, but the Church that leads us to Christ (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enlarged ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982], 553).

⁸² J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Mission* 41 (1952): 325. Paul F. M. Zahl agrees, opining, “History teaches that interest in polity breaks the waves of the oceanic tide of Christian theology only when other, larger issues are no longer the presenting, absorbed ones. When polity and ecclesiology become absorbing questions for the church, you can bet we are in a time of a comparative *stasis*.” The larger issues to which he refers are justification, the presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord’s Supper, divine providence, predestination, and human free will. Certainly, these are monumental issues, though with regard to the Lord’s Supper, I would argue that the church would have been better off if it had never become absorbed with such a speculative matter (e.g., it was the one divisive point separating Protestant from Protestant at the Marburg Colloquy). Regrettably, Zahl does not indicate any specific historical period in which ecclesiology and polity overtook these other weighty issues (Paul F. M. Zahl, “The Bishop-Led Church: The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed, Weighed, and Defended,” in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 210–211).

explaining that “the existence of a new social order is a necessary implicate of the gospel of Jesus Christ”; hence, “the life of the Christian community is internal to the logic of the gospel [and not] simply accessory and accidental.”⁸³ He goes on further to ground the church in the doctrines of God and salvation. Specifically, he avers that the church “is ingredient within the divine economy of salvation.”⁸⁴ His argument is the following:

The revealed secret of God not only concerns the unfathomable majesty of God himself; it also concerns that human society which the triune God elects, sustains and perfects ‘to the praise of his glorious grace’ (Eph. 1.5). From this there emerge two fundamental principles for an evangelical ecclesiology. First, there can be no doctrine of God without a doctrine of the church, for according to the Christian confession God *is* the one who manifests who he is in the economy of his saving work in which he assembles a people for himself. Second there can be no doctrine of the church which is not wholly referred to the doctrine of God, in whose being and action alone the church has its being and action.⁸⁵

Working from the doctrine of God, Webster starts with the ontological Trinity, specifically, the metaphysical greatness or perfection of God, which “is the repleteness of his life, the fullness or completeness of his being, the entirety with which he is himself. As the perfect one, God is utterly realized, lacks nothing, and is devoid of no element of his own blessedness.”⁸⁶ This perfection of God relates to both his life and his 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. . . . [H]e is incomparably alive. The perfection of God’s *acts* is the pure completeness of the divine work.”⁸⁷

From this discussion of the ontological Trinity, Webster moves to the economic Trinity: “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.”⁸⁸ More specifically, this is a “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

⁸³ John Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 1/1 (2004): 9. I would provide biblical warrant for Webster’s assertion by appealing to Luke’s narrative structure in Acts 2: following his account of the descent of the Holy Spirit and its explanation (2:1–21), Peter’s announcement of the gospel (2:22–36), and the crowd’s response (2:37–41), Luke concludes with a snapshot of these first Christians meeting in the temple and gathering in homes (2:42–47). Taking this narrative as all of a piece, we understand that incorporation into the church is part and parcel of the gospel and its reception.

⁸⁴ John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 193, 195.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 195. Webster’s reference to Ephesians 1:5 should be 1:6 instead.

⁸⁶ Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 12–13.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

being.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, this movement, “in which God wills and provides for free creaturely beings, is a necessary movement. It is not externally necessary; . . . rather, it is internally necessary because it flows from the eternal divine counsel to be himself”⁹⁰ in this movement. This movement, then, is one of holy love by which God “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.”⁹¹ Finally, this movement is one of divine grace, which “is sovereignty directed to the creature’s well-being.”⁹²

Webster draws out the implications of his discussion for ecclesiology: “In this . . . 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.”⁹³ Thus, he affirms the “necessarily derivative character” of the church as the society of those elected, called, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified in Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

Webster’s grounding of the church in the gospel, the perfection of God, and the grace of salvation is quite a welcomed approach. For evangelicals who wish a more explicitly biblical approach, I think his presentation can be augmented.

The first augmentation focuses on the eternal counsel of God in redeeming fallen human creatures. In his rehearsal of the goodness of God, Paul assures us that the reason that Christians can count on God to be good to them in the midst of suffering and heartache is that the divine goodness has always surrounded and will always surround them (Rom. 8:28–30). Paul addresses the eternal counsel (foreknowledge, predestination) of the triune God with respect to fallen human beings who would be redeemed (called, justified) and eternally blessed (glorified) through being completely renewed and made eminent (“conformed to the image of his Son”) for the supremacy of Jesus Christ (“the firstborn among many brothers”). This redeemed community, therefore, is not an afterthought of divine adjustment, nor an accident of history; rather, it is part of the eternal purpose of God. Accordingly, from eternity past, the divine plan was never just to create human beings in an original state of integrity. The eternal divine counsel was rather to create such human beings, permit them to fall, provide atonement for sin through the crucified Son of God (who, as a “lamb without blemish or spot . . . was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times”; 1 Pet. 1:19–20), redeem sinners, and renew and glorify them for-

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

ever. If the family image is specifically used here (“the firstborn among many brothers”), certainly the shadow of the redeemed community is not missing. If this is the case, then the church is part and parcel of the eternal purpose of the God who is good toward his redeemed human creatures.⁹⁵

My second augmentation derives from Christology, specifically from the Father’s mighty work in regard to the exaltation of his humiliated and crucified Son. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he prays that the church might grasp the immeasurable greatness of the Father’s power (Eph. 1:19–23). Among the several movements of the divine power listed in this passage, the one that attracts our attention is the Father’s subjection of everything to his Son and his giving of the Son as supreme head to the church, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Father’s exaltation of the Son—whose incarnation, humiliation in suffering, death, and resurrection were the precursor to this stage of honoring him—entailed placing the Son as sovereign Lord over all things—in the angelic realm, the human sphere, this present age, and the eschaton. In this capacity of Lord over all, he was established by the Father as head of the church, his body. Now it could possibly be argued that this exaltation was part of the eternal plan of God and thus the church would become necessary as the body corresponding to its head. But it does not seem essential to make this argument, for even without it, the church as the body of Christ is still necessary for the post-incarnation, post-humiliation, post-crucifixion, and post-resurrection exaltation of the Son as Lord over all.

A third augmentation focuses on the eternal plan of God with regard to the revelation of himself and his ways. This point again appeals to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (3:3–11) and notes that the apostle describes the church in relation to the plan of God. Within this eternal divine purpose for all things, “the plan of the mystery” (v. 9)—“that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 6)—remained a divine secret until God revealed it. Paul’s engagement in ministry to the Gentiles is the occasion for bringing to light this mystery (vv. 7–8). Astoundingly, Paul adds that the church is an instrument by which this revelation of God’s eternal plan is made known. Furthermore, the testimony of the church is not directed to other human beings or human communities; rather, the church’s witness is borne to “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (v. 10)—the angelic realm.⁹⁶ As already noted, Paul situates his entire discussion within the sphere of “the eternal purpose that he [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 11). As Calvin writes, “How carefully does he guard against the objection, that the purpose of God has

⁹⁵ Badcock, *House Where God Lives*, 26.

⁹⁶ Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34 (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1974), 363–364.

been changed!”⁹⁷ The point is clear and well established: the church belongs within the eternal divine counsel as a means of divine revelation.

A fourth and final augmentation notes the church’s prominent role in prophetic Scripture. This point combines several prophetic elements. The first is Jesus’ promise to his disciples following Peter’s confession of his (Jesus’) identity: “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). As that which was promised by Jesus, the church is a necessary work of his. Furthermore, Jesus’ announcement to his disciples of his promise of the church is linked in the same narrative to another announcement to his disciples of his suffering, death, and resurrection on the third day (Matt. 16:21). It does not seem too far a stretch to say that Jesus’ mission of accomplishing salvation and of constructing the church is all of a piece. If this is the case, then the church becomes an ingredient in the Son’s mission to rescue humanity from sin. And Jesus himself prophesied the church and its role in the outworking of salvation.

This link is made even stronger and is warranted by an appeal to Scripture in a second prophetic element. At the conclusion of his Gospel, Luke presents some final instructions of Jesus for his disciples following his resurrection (Luke 24:44–49). Jesus tells them that he had to fulfill all that the Jewish Scriptures foretold about him. Specifically, this fulfillment included his suffering leading to death, his resurrection from the dead on the third day, and his disciples’ proclamation of the good news beginning in Jerusalem and extending throughout the entire world. Though it is anachronistic to insert the church at this juncture in Luke’s two-volume work,⁹⁸ that this proclamation of the gospel will be ecclesially rooted as well as ecclesially fruitful is the point the evangelist will make at the beginning of his second writing.

Indeed, in the opening chapter of Acts, Luke picks up this last theme (Acts 1:1–8) and narrates two additional stories: Jesus’ ascension (vv. 9–11) and the replacement for Judas (vv. 12–26). In this latter section we find a third prophetic element. Luke specifically notes those who were present in the upper room, waiting obediently for the coming of the Holy Spirit: “Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James” (v. 13). The “Twelve” are obviously lacking one of their members. Spokesman Peter announces that Scripture has to be fulfilled concerning the missing Judas. Not only was Judas’s demise in accord with Scripture (the citation is Ps. 69:25); the need to replace him with another qualified apostle

⁹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 256.

⁹⁸ Though others, like Twelftree, would affirm the church’s existence at this point (Twelftree, *People of the Spirit*, 16, 28).

was also biblically warranted (the citation is Ps. 109:8). Matthias is the one divinely chosen to replace Judas and, as Luke concludes, “he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26), becoming a witness of the resurrection along with them (v. 22). This band of witnesses, waiting in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, will be empowered to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ beginning in the holy city (Acts 2) and extending to the ends of the world (Acts 28). As the foundation of the church, their role must be seen as necessary (in fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture), and as they are the foundation of the church that emerges after Pentecost, the church becomes a necessary part of the divine plan to rescue both Jews and Gentiles.

The church, then, is necessary for several reasons: it is part and parcel of (1) the eternal purpose of God in redeeming his fallen human creatures; (2) the Father’s mighty work in regard to the exaltation of his humiliated and crucified Son; (3) the eternal divine counsel with regard to the revelation of himself and his ways; and (4) prophetic Scripture that assigns an important role to the church in the outworking of salvation. So as not to be misunderstood, I am advocating a necessity for the church that is derivative and instrumental, not causative and foundational. This contingent status does not, however, render the church accidental; on the contrary, its “necessarily derivative character” demands our incorporation into, participation in, and allegiance to the church of Jesus Christ.⁹⁹

In conclusion, ecclesiology may not be a doctrine of highest importance like theology proper and bibliology, but it is nevertheless of great importance, for this simple reason: the church of Jesus Christ itself is a necessary reality. This fact propels the Christian doctrine devoted to the study of the church to a high level of prominence.

⁹⁹ Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” 10.

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GREGG R. ALLISON (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is secretary for the Evangelical Theology Society, serves as a book review editor for *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, and is an elder at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville.

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